

## Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, September 6,2015

### **Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23**

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,  
and favor is better than silver or gold.

The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the Lord is the maker of them all.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,  
and the rod of anger will fail.

Those who are generous are blessed,  
for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate;  
for the Lord pleads their cause  
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

## Mark 7:24-37

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "*Ephphatha*," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Let us pray....Amen.

I love it when our scriptures work together to illustrate a theme! And I love it even more when our scriptures illustrate a theme that is foundational to our faith, and faith practices.

Our Hebrew scripture this morning from Proverbs sets the stage: wisdom tells us that a good reputation is more valuable than wealth. That God's children will reap what they sow. That God sides with those whose lives are poor and afflicted.

Those three things alone stand as pretty good material for a sermon, don't you think? But they are just the appetizer! The main course comes when we hear about an encounter between Jesus and a Gentile woman who is requesting healing for her daughter, and an encounter between Jesus and a man who is deaf and has difficulty speaking.

And by the miracle that is Holy Scripture, there is an inkling of a theme here that has a significant impact on the way we live our faith lives. There are some important concepts and instructions here for those of us who wish to follow Jesus on his way.

The first encounter between Jesus and the Syrophonecian woman is a little bit complicated, so it might take me a minute to unpack it. We know from the narrative that Jesus wanted to be alone, in secret. He had been recently sighted performing healings, and so he was becoming well-known, sought after by all who wished to be healed, or who wished loved ones to be healed.

He was spotted by a woman of Syrophonecian origin. This is important only in the sense that she was a Gentile, a non-Jew. She spotted him, bowed down before him, and begged him to heal her daughter, who apparently had some form of seizure disorder.

After hearing her plea, Jesus issues this response: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Essentially, Jesus is repeating the basic Jewish understanding of Jews versus Gentiles. He is comparing the Jews to children who are to be served first. He is comparing the woman and her daughter to unclean dogs, literally unclean puppies, that are not worthy of being fed.

And then the story takes a surprising turn: the woman does not take Jesus literally, or take offense, she actually picks up the metaphor and takes it one further: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." This is a deft and clever use of the metaphor, and stands out as highly unusual for an uneducated woman. And it takes Jesus by surprise. So much so, that he decides to heal the woman's daughter over long distance. We should note here that Jesus does not say "Your faith has made your daughter well" like he has with other healings. In this case, he simply states that the demon has left her daughter.

Now, some scholars have suggested that Jesus didn't really believe that Gentiles are dogs, or unworthy of healing, and took this encounter as an opportunity to demonstrate a more inclusive approach to God's children. Others have argued that Jesus actually did believe that Gentiles were less worthy, and that this forward thinking and forward acting woman changed his mind with her quit wit and excellent use of his own metaphor.

I'm not sure it matters which one is true: what we *do* know is that Jesus ultimately ended up healing far more Gentiles in the gospels than he did Jews. That he began living his belief of inclusion even as it stood out against the Jewish laws and customs that dictated his behavior and his approach to ministry.

It seems to me that Jesus is able to see the wisdom from our Hebrew scripture, and apply it in such a way that it becomes part and parcel of his own unique form of ministry. And, recorded in scripture, becomes a lesson for the children of God when they read it or hear it.

If the wisdom of the Hebrew scripture is the appetizer, and the encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman is the main course, then the encounter with the deaf man is most definitely dessert!

Traveling again after his brief respite, Jesus is brought a man who is deaf, and who has a speech impediment. Again we have Jesus being begged to heal. But instead of a public healing, Jesus seeks privacy, and when they are alone, Jesus heals in another unusual way: putting his fingers in the man's ears, spitting on his hand and touching the man's tongue, looking up to Heaven and sighing, and then saying "Be Opened", the man's deafness and speech impediment are healed.

He ordered those present to keep silent, but of course it is human nature to speak about miracles like these, and so the crowd was astonished beyond measure and probably went out and told everyone they knew about it.

"Be Opened". What a wonderful phrase. A wonderful healing phrase for the man who needed healing, and a wonderfully instructive phrase for those of us who wish to follow Jesus. "Be Opened" can be applied to our own lives, our own thoughts, our own faith living. "Be Opened" is the exact opposite of "Be Closed", isn't it?

By placing the Proverbs passage alongside our Gospel lesson, it's almost as if God is saying that the path to a good reputation is to share with those less fortunate, and Jesus is saying that when we are "opened", we can make that happen.

It's no secret that Jesus defied many Jewish customs and laws as he went about his ministry. It's what got him in trouble with the authorities of the church. It's what got him arrested, tortured, and crucified. And he did that to teach those who would follow him to "Be Opened". To not fear being inclusive of others who are different, or outside of our cultural norms. He led by example, and expects us to live accordingly.

But too often, we choose to "Be Closed". Closed to those who are poor, or mentally ill, or criminal, or different. Too often we base our likes and dislikes on whether someone is more or less like us. Open to those who are like us, Closed to those who are not like us.

But this flies in the face of the Christ's teaching. It is an affront to his life and ministry and sacrifice for us. If we live a life of Being Closed, we are ignoring his gift of eternal life and forgiveness.

When we live lives of Being Opened, we are celebrating and receiving that eternal life and forgiveness. When we live our lives Opened, we are practicing what Jesus taught us about how to treat others. All others. Neighbors, friends, loved ones, enemies too.

Too often custom and tradition and fear cause us to consider those who are different to be unclean. Dogs in the words of our savior. And too often, there is little that can get us to change our minds. They are closed. Our minds are made up.

But Jesus says "Be Opened!" And he means it. Be Opened to the possibility that those who are different are far more like us than not. Be Opened to the idea that they live, and love, and hurt, and bleed and cry just like you and me.

Be Opened to the idea that we will reap what we sow when it comes to how we treat others, and that God sides with those who are in need.

Be Opened to the idea that as a society, God expects us to say: 'We're all in this together', and not 'You're on your own'.

Be Opened to the fact that someday, we ourselves might find that *we* are the different ones, the ones in need of help!

In our Hebrew scripture, I hear the building blocks of a faith approach. In our Gospel, I hear how we should use those blocks to build a faith life.

Let us Be Opened to God's Holy Word, and let us Be Opened to the way that leads to eternal life and forgiveness of our sins. It is clear to me that Jesus intends for us to be inclusive, not exclusive. To be open, not closed.

Deep down, inside our souls, we each know where we have been open and where we have been closed. None of us is immune from the message: we can always be more inclusive. The challenge is to work at being more open. And if we can do that, it gives us more opportunities to experience God's Grace and forgiveness.

As children of God, we will reap what we sow. So let us find ways to sow more seeds of openness and inclusion, more seeds of welcome and patience, more seeds of love and acceptance. The harvest will be all the more sweet the more Opened we become.

With Open hearts, with Open spirits, with Open eyes, ears and minds, may we continue to live out the faith lives God has in store for us. Amen.

