

“Be Opened”

Sermon for 14 Pentecost 2009 (September 6)

By Robert Bowler

In our Gospel for today, Jesus is traveling through Tyre, visiting people’s homes, looking for some personal, quiet time. But the people would not leave him alone, for as he taught and healed, word about him spread, and the people kept coming. Then he returned towards the Sea of Galilee where a deaf man with a speech impediment was brought to him. He put his fingers into the man’s ears and spat and touched the man’s tongue. Then he looked up to heaven, sighed and said “Ephphatha”, “Be Opened”, and the man could hear clearly and speak plainly.

“Ephphatha”, “Be Opened”.

We need ears to hear, eyes to see, a mind to understand, a heart to love, the reality of the beloved community Christ brings to us when he travels through our neighborhoods knocking on our doors.

In Proverbs we read a snippet of ancient, practical wisdom: “Those who are generous will be blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. Do not rob the poor..., or crush the afflicted.” The Lord is the maker of all. No one is higher or lower. We are called to a radical compassion for the poor, the suffering, because ultimately we are of one self in God. What we do to others we do to ourselves.

“Ephphatha”, “Be Opened”.

Trust in the Lord, the psalmist cries out to us today, for then we will be as immovable as a mountain which stands, solid, forever. The Lord stands round about his people as the hills stand about Jerusalem, forever. Be good to those who are good and true of heart.

“Ephphatha”, “Be Opened”.

In James, we are warned against playing favorites in the congregation, which I know and you know is something we all do. We make distinctions; we put certain people in our parish above other people. It is only human. We are judging creatures. We have our preferences and prejudices. However, you know and I know that we are called to a broader vision of community.

Some among us pledge and others have not yet pledged. Are those who have not yet pledged somehow in a lower membership category in the church? No. Some pledge more and others less. We do not parade those who pledge more in front of others who may give comparatively little. Remember the widow’s mite? Those who have less may give little, but it may be a higher percentage of their income and given with a great generosity of spirit, and the love in their gift may benefit the church in deep and mysterious ways.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, they are rich in faith, and they enrich our community. Whether rich or poor or somewhere in between, the open, generous heart builds the beloved community with their talent or time or treasure or even all three in powerful ways, large or small, whether recognized and applauded or done quietly with anonymity.

“Ephphatha”, “Be Opened”.

For what good is it, James asks in his epistle, if you have faith in God and hope for the world, but you do not show it in what you do? Our faith in God in our midst is known by our actions just as an apple, pear or plum tree is known by its fruits. We bring communion to the ill and housebound, the elderly and hospitalized. We deliver fruit and vegetables to those in need, faithfully, three times each week. We serve supper free of cost to all who wish to join us every Monday night. We help with a train or bus ticket, a security deposit, first and last month's rent, a power or fuel bill to several people each and every week. We offer a kind word and a loving heart whenever the opportunity arises.

“Ephphatha”, “Be Opened”.

Showing our faith with our actions is not always easy. Day after day, week after week, it can be difficult to tolerate. Go help Mary with the community supper, week after week, year after year, as so many do, and see how easy it is! You have to have a heart cracked wide open by love to have the energy to carry on, and the pain of it can be excruciating. Jesus sought quiet, alone time, and we need time to pray and be alone with God, too, or we will not abide long in acts of compassion.

The other day, a woman came into the office and she was livid. She had called because she needed help with rent. Bette agreed to send a check to her landlord. She came in yelling at me because we did not give her cash to “take to her landlord” because it would avoid the delay of mailing the check. Another man whom we were helping with a train ticket argued with me because we would not give him cash. What if he was starving or lay in agony in the parking lot, he argued. Sometimes we need to offer tough love as well as tender, but both kinds of love need to be given openly and freely, as well as patiently.

“Ephphatha”, “Be Opened”.

Be open to the vision of Christ: we are all one in the love of God. But here is a warning for those who choose to open their hearts to the love of God. There is no partial love, no favorites, no prejudice in compassion. If your love is conditional (saying, “I will be a part of this community if things go according to my will, my narrow vision of what should be, my wants and desires, on my terms”) then you will rant and rave and fall away. And your ranting and your raving will undermine *our* (your and my and all of *our*) ability to bring the love of God and the beloved community here and now.

In England, at every train and underground tube station, it is written on the edge of the platform and even announced on the loud speaker: “Mind the gap!” The gap between the platform where we stand waiting and the floor of the train when the door opens can be dangerous and can trip us up and even crush us to death if we don't **pay attention** and proceed with care.

The gap is between where we stand on the platform and the train we are planning to board. It is between what is, all the imperfections of where we stand now, and the hope, the dream, the vision of what should be.

We are a church. Therefore, people expect we will live up to their expectations of what a church should be, God's church representing God's community on earth, the very ministry of

Christ. However, we are also human, each and every one of us is doing the best we can in the ministries we are called to do here.

So all aboard, but mind the gap! Don't stand on the platform throwing rocks at the train. We are all in this together. Together we are the Beloved Community, as best as we are able to incarnate it here and now, together. We have many and various gifts, but we are one body. We are one train, and it is moving down the track. All the parts must work together, well oiled, for the train to run at speed. Throw a spanner in the works and we wind up needing mechanical repairs instead of chugging along smoothly in the love of God.

So let's all call out loud and clear, together, lifting our gaze as one body to God and Christ's love: "Ephphatha", "Be Opened".

Christ did and he was crucified; they threw rocks at his train, but he submitted to God's will. As a result we have the vision of the Beloved Community and what it takes to get there. As a result, it continues to grow in our midst because our faith is known in our actions.

"Ephphatha", "Be Opened".

Let your hard shell crack. Open to the love of God. But mind the gap. Step on board, but pay attention. We are one body and what we do to each other we do to ourselves. However, know also that what we do is as inevitable as we are human; therefore the passion of Christ continues here now in us as we open ourselves to the love of God and bring it to our suffering world.

"Ephphatha", "Be Opened". There is no other way to heal. Amen.