

“*Ephphatha*,” Jesus said. “Be opened.”

Our gospel this morning tells the story of a healing miracle of Jesus. And, like all of Jesus’ healings, the healing we hear of today is more than just the cure of a physical disability. The people bring to Jesus a man who is deaf and has an impediment in his speech. Jesus touches his ears and touches his tongue and cures him. But what I find especially interesting about this healing story is the word Jesus uses as the word of divine command that banishes the impediment. “*Ephphatha*,” Jesus says, “Be opened”—and that single word has a tremendous symbolic resonance, that word is ringing with spiritual overtones. Jesus doesn’t just say, “Receive your hearing” or “I tell you, rise up and talk.” He says, “Be opened.” The miracle here is not just that Jesus heals someone of a disability; the miracle is that Jesus sets someone free from being closed in on himself and opens him up to restored life and renewed relationships in a faithful community.

I’ve heard it said that deafness is the most isolating kind of disability, because it cuts off relationships, it shuts a person out from so much of the communication and exchange that gives life its substance, its meaning, its depth. Imagine how it must have been the deaf man in the gospel story, before there were such things as hearing aids or sign language or closed-captioning. He could see life going on around him, he could see people’s faces, see that they were talking, weeping, laughing with each other, haggling in the marketplace, conversing ’round the dinner table, but he couldn’t tell what any of it meant. He had thoughts, needs, feelings, dreams; but he could not speak to share his inner life with anyone. He couldn’t even participate in the faith of the community: synagogue services in those days were all reciting scripture and chanting and praying, and there were no prayer books or bulletins to follow along, and if you couldn’t *hear*, you couldn’t participate. The man in the story was shut out from the world, closed in on the small sphere of himself—until Jesus said to him, “*Ephphatha*: Be opened.”

So the story is about more than just the cure of a physical disability. The story is about Jesus giving a man a chance to hear his name called, a chance to speak a greeting or a question or a thank-you, a chance to pray with his neighbors, a chance to break out of his isolation and enter into communication and communion with the world that surrounds him. The story is about the grace of Christ entering into a person’s life and opening him up to new wholeness, new relationships, new faithfulness—new life with his neighbors, with himself, and with God.

In fact, that call to *be opened* is a theme that runs all through our scripture readings this morning. In the first part of the Gospel reading today, before the healing of the deaf man, Jesus himself is called to *be opened* to a new understanding of his community of faith. Jesus has gone into Tyre, a Gentile region, presumably to take a break from the crowds that have been following him in the Jewish territories around Galilee; and while he’s in Tyre a Syrophenecian woman comes to him, asking him to heal her daughter. Now up to this point, Jesus’ ministry has been pretty much restricted to the Jewish people: his miracles and healings have been specific signs of the presence of the God of the Covenant with the Covenant People. The Syrophenecian woman, a Gentile, outside the Covenant, would not and could not understand Jesus’ healing as the sign of the Covenant God it’s meant to be; therefore, Jesus thinks, it would be inappropriate to show her a sign she couldn’t understand; so he says to her “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But this woman is wise enough to hear the proverbial tone in what Jesus says, and she’s wise enough to respond with a counter-proverb of her own: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” When Jesus hears that wisdom, Jesus recognizes that this woman knows the ways of God even if she is not within the Covenant, Jesus recognizes that she can indeed receive healing as the sign of God’s power that it is meant to be. So Jesus says “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter”; and Jesus himself is in the process opened up to a new understanding of just how wide his community of faith can be.

The call to *be opened* to renewed relationships in faithful community is there in the readings from Proverbs and James as well. Proverbs reminds us that “those who are generous are blessed,” and those who “rob the poor because they are poor” are cursed, because “the rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.” According to Proverbs, the community of faith goes deeper than lines drawn by economic class, and God calls faithful people to *be opened* to the common good of all. That message comes through even more strongly in the reading from James. “You do well to fulfill the royal law of scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’” James says. “But how can you do that when you show favoritism to the rich and humiliation to the poor? How can you love your neighbor as yourself when you say to a brother or sister in need ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’ but don’t do anything to give them what they need?” This reading from James, like the reading from Proverbs, is a clarion call to us to *be opened* to the power of God for the common good in renewed relationships in faithful community.

And it seems to me that one place we, here and now, today, can *be opened* to renewed relationships in faithful community is in the debate going on in our country about healthcare reform. Now, I’m not talking here about taking sides in that debate, I’m not talking about whether you favor a public option or private insurance plans, I’m not talking about a single-payer system or an open exchange on the market. What I am talking about is the way the public discourse around this issue seems in many cases to have fallen apart. I’m talking about town hall meetings that descend into little more than shouting matches. I’m talking about people accusing each other of being socialists or fearmongers or Nazis without really trying to understand each other’s points of view. I’m talking about people bringing assault weapons to public gatherings because they believe that talking about healthcare reform will somehow threaten their Second Amendment rights. I’m talking about TV pundits spreading misinformation and rumors and outright lies and just plain bad faith to rev up support among their viewers for their particular opinions. I’m talking about what seems more and more a collective inability to have a civil public conversation about our common good, about finding a way for the wealthiest nation in the world to make sure that all its people can afford to be healthy. And it seems to me that we, we Christians who are also citizens, we who are called to *be opened* to renewed relationships in community of good faith—it seems to me that we have a role to play in raising the level of our public discourse for our common good. Whether it be the way we talk about it with our friends, whether it be writing letters to the editor or postings on blogs, whether it be attending town hall meetings and striving to be a voice of patient reason in the midst of it all—whatever it may be, I think each of us can find some way to work to restore civility to this issue, each of us can find some way to help cut through the craziness and get closer to what the Epistle of James calls for: to say to our brothers and sisters “Go in peace, be healthy”; and then *do* something to help that healthcare really happen.

The call to *be opened* to renewed relationships in faithful community for the common good is part of our public life as Christians in the world. And it is part of our shared life here in this Christian community. We are shaped and trained in how to *be opened* in our life together in Trinity: in the way we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep; in the way we care for each other’s needs and share with each other our goods; in the way we gather to be nourished with bread and wine in the name of Jesus and learn to see in each other the living presence of the Body of Christ; in the way we lift each other up in prayer and serve each other in love. Our life together here at Trinity is a school for souls, teaching us all how to *be opened* to Christ’s call.

Jesus said to the deaf man “*Ephphatha*: Be opened.” And Jesus says that to us today, as well. May we hear Jesus’ call, and may we *be opened* to Jesus’ grace, this day and always. Amen.