

Sixteenth Week After Pentecost (RCL/B): "Be Opened! Be Open!"
James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37
September 7-8, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Be open!" we say when challenging someone to try something new: encouraging a hamburger-and-fries person to order escargots, urging a couch potato to train for a 5K, inviting a chemist to paint an icon. "Be open!"

In today's Gospel Jesus commands the ears of a deaf/mute man, "*Be opened!*" In Jesus' mother tongue, Aramaic: "*Ephphatha!*" "*And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.*" (Mark 7:34-35) If only our minds and hearts were so easily opened.... It's usually a much longer process to get from our human **close**-mindedness to Spirit-inspired **open**-mindedness. Sometimes a new situation helps us along, by forcing us to stand outside ourselves and look at things from a fresh perspective. No matter how **objective** we think we are, how **much** we think we know, how **right** we believe we are, the Holy Spirit always has something new to show us, some deeper depth of discipleship to delve in us.

Dorothy Day was a 20th century social reformer. She was a Roman Catholic and founded the Catholic Worker houses, resource-filled homes for the down-and-out, laid low by poverty, physical or mental illness, addiction. She was famous even during her lifetime as a woman of faith who was a relentless crusader for the poor. One day she was spending time with a shelter guest, sharing in a conversation that didn't make a lot of sense because the guest was high, drunk, or profoundly mentally ill. Dorothy noticed out of the corner of her eye that someone was on the sidelines, patiently (or impatiently) waiting his turn, positioning himself to get her attention. Eventually she turned toward him and asked, "Are you hoping to speak with one of us?" The man was probably answering internally, "Yeah, YOU!" But to Dorothy, the woman with whom she was

speaking was also a child of God, worthy of the world's attention and of this journalist's time.

What a **different** take on things! It's like Jesus was speaking through her to that man, saying, "*Be opened!*" "Be open!" 'Safe to say Dorothy Day said, "Yes!" to the question we heard earlier in the Letter of James: "*Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?*" (James 2:5b)

In the car the other day I was listening to a piece about Dungeons and Dragons. I know very little about it apart from what I've picked up watching *Stranger Things* (which actually got a little **too** strange for me!). People were asked to call in and share their experiences with that fantasy on-line video game. The reporter mentioned his **surprise** that some callers-in were so **emotional**. One example was a father who called in and tearily shared how Dungeons and Dragons had provided much needed safe space for his trans child who was being bullied at school.

Truly safe space, in whatever form it takes, is a good thing for all of us. But we can only hope that young person will find not only **virtual** safe space but also **real world** safe space populated by other caring human beings. Safe space like a faith family, a community of loving, accepting, helping, affirming people. Years ago, pre-lockdown, we had 2 or 3 forums to "Be open!" and learn more about transgender people and issues. The parents of a Holy Trinity trans youth talked about participating in a parental support group. (At that time they traveled out-of-state to do so.) Other members of the support group were shocked to hear there was actually a church community, Holy Trinity, that embraced them and their child. Hopefully today, maybe 10 years later, such a community is not a rarity. We need to remain true to welcoming **all** others as Jesus has welcomed us.

"Be opened!" our Lord says, to the ears of the deaf man in today's Gospel, to the eyes of the blind man in an upcoming Gospel, and **to our minds and hearts** every day. Is He really going

to ask us someday, “You let **who** in?” or is He going to ask, “Why did you wall them out?” Our faith family’s welcome, our loving acceptance, may make the difference between a kid’s safe space being time alone in his bedroom, comfy in his console chair with headphones on, in front of a computer monitor, or interacting with others as a valued member of a caring community.

Not that it was always so **easy** for our Lord to be opened to expanding His **own** ministry in this life. Before He commanded the deaf man’s ears to be opened, His heart had to be opened to the plea of a non-Jew, a Gentile woman, a mother in anguish over her daughter’s emotional, spiritual disturbance (as *The Message* describes the child’s sickness). There’s no way around the fact that Jesus **balks** when the mother **begs** Him “*to cast the demon out of her daughter*” (Mark 7:26b). His response startles and disturbs us:

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (Mark 7:27)

In Jewish and Greek cultures then and now, like in our own, it is hands-down insulting to call someone a dog. But the woman responds in humility and trust and maternal-love-that-will-not-be-denied:

“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” (Mark 7:28)

The mother has helped Jesus see the situation through **her** eyes and His ears are opened to hear her plea in a new way. His perspective is changed, His healing heart **opened**:

“For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.” (Mark 7:29)

Change is constant. Heraclitus was the Greek philosopher who said we can never step into the same river twice. We live with continual change, but we don’t necessarily **like** it. (Somebody else said that the only ones who like change are babies in need of a fresh diaper.) Our devotion to “*Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever*” (Hebrews 13:8) doesn’t mean that the historic, fully human, fully divine Jesus of Nazareth never changed His mind. He matured over the years,

like hopefully all of us are doing. Today's Gospel is a solid example of our Lord changing His mind along the Way.

The Church has changed her mind about some things along the Way. Many of you will remember the era when there were no female pastors. (Lutherans didn't begin to ordain women until 1970.) Many will recall the days when there were no divorced pastors. Even more will remember the time when there were no gay pastors. We can honestly say the Church of the Reformation is the Church of Change: reforming and always in need of reform. It was almost exactly 500 years ago that Martin Luther first encouraged pastors to **marry**. What a scandal! Priests hadn't been allowed to marry for 500 years, so who was **he, a heretic former monk who had Rome in a tizzy**, to initiate change?? He was a man inspired by the Holy Spirit to see the bigger picture and to interpret Scripture as saying, "Be opened!" and not, "Stay closed!"

Someone has said that the greatest miracle in today's Gospel isn't a tormented child being healed or a deaf man hearing and speaking, but a spiritual Berlin Wall being bulldozed. The wall separated Jews and Gentiles, and Jesus breached it by heeding a pagan's mother plea and making a pagan child whole. We who are claimed and named as His are called to break down the walls that still separate us. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to open the doors of our hearts more and more, bringing out the spiritual WD40 when necessary. The Lord will never question whom we **did** invite and welcome, only whom we **didn't**. Amen

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