

Opening

Mark 7:24-37

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 15) 2024

Kyle Childress

I only know that I did not know what love was until I encountered one that kept opening and opening and opening. And until I acknowledged that what that love was opening onto, and into, was God.

-Christian Wiman

Spoiler alert: I don't have a sermon. But I have a concept of a sermon.

A few years ago, a cartoon made the rounds on social media featuring a CEO, a laborer, and a foreigner sitting at a table. In it, the CEO has a huge plate of cookies in front of him, the laborer has one cookie, and the immigrant has none. The CEO turns to the laborer and says, "Be careful. That foreigner wants your cookie!"

First-century historian Flavius Josephus described the ongoing tensions between Jews and the residents of Tyre, as described in Mark's Gospel. Rome ruled over them all but made sure the two colonized communities fought each other over several issues, including and most especially the limited resources after the Roman Empire siphoned off what it wanted. Rome successfully deflected attention from its imperial economic practices by playing one colonized community off against another. The same things happened in America when the post-civil war wealthy elites, both northern industrialists and business tycoons or southern gentry, played off poor white farmers against poor black farmers. Those with the wealth and power always convinced all the poor folk, black or white, Jew

or Gentile, that there was only a limited amount of wealth, a limited number of jobs, a limited amount of anything, and that the other groups were out to get what little you had.

This is what a variety of thinkers – everyone from mental health therapists to social workers to historians to sociologists to economists to theologians refer to as a “scarcity” mindset. A scarcity mindset means that we’re convinced that everything is a zero-sum game, where there is only a limited number of resources – food, money, jobs, love, or whatever – and when someone receives some of that resource, there is less available for others. It is at the heart of the debate about immigration today. It is at the heart of America’s social divisions.

In Mark, this scarcity mindset is rampant in chapters six, seven, and eight. Interesting to me is that these scarcity stories are framed, like bookends, with feeding stories. In chapter 6 Jesus feeds the 5,000 who are fearful about not having enough to eat out in the wilderness. Then over in chapter 8, Jesus feeds another 4,000 people over across the Sea of Galilee in the Gentile country of the Decapolis, named for ten Greek speaking cities on the east side of the Jordan River.

Mark says that Jesus was near Tyre and Sidon – about 40 miles northwest of Galilee – (on the coast of modern Lebanon) which was Gentile country. It is up north, on the border, where Jews and Gentiles, faithful people of God and pagans, and all sorts of people mix together.

So up north, on the border, a Syrophoenician woman, a non-Jew, who had a sick daughter came to him asking him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Now Mark is very clear (so is Matthew) the woman was a Gentile. She is not a member of God’s chosen people. She lives on the border, where the empire is trying to build walls. This is the boundary between the old and the new, between male and

female, between Jew and Gentile, between friend and enemy, between pure and impure, between the holy and the demonic, where Jesus finds himself in this conversation.

Now Jesus was a Jew, all his disciples were Jews, all his ministry had been with Jews and here comes a Gentile, a mixed race Syrophoenician woman seeking his healing for her daughter. She begs for his help and Jesus' reply is very unusual. Jesus is very direct, "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).

When he said "children" he meant the Jews and when he said "dogs" he was referring to this woman, her daughter, and all Gentiles (like us). Now, I don't know about you, but I am not so sure I like what I'm hearing Jesus say and we have been raised to always like whatever Jesus says.

It has been interesting to read different commentaries about what he said. Every one of them cannot bear to admit that Jesus is rude to the woman; he is curt, brusque – saying to her, "You go on. This kingdom stuff I'm talking about is not for you."

But this woman will not take no for an answer. She argues. She knows what he is saying and is clever enough and persistent enough to turn it around and say, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She is referring to the common practice that people ate with their right hand, and they would wipe their fingers on bread and whatever bread was not eaten was scraped off the table for the dogs.

Though this mixed-race Gentile woman does not know Jesus as God incarnate, she does recognize him as the Son of David, which means she

recognizes him as the Messiah, God's chosen One. She has the chutzpah to stand up to God's anointed Messiah because she wants her daughter healed.

And lo and behold, Jesus changes his mind. He responds to her and heals her daughter...

What do you think about that? This is the only time the Gospels record Jesus changing his mind. What does this mean? Why was it important for the church to remember this story?

I'll tell you what I think. I think that in the middle of this exchange with this Gentile woman Jesus is asking himself, "What have I gotten myself into?" This Gentile woman helps him realize that the kingdom of God which Jesus proclaims and embodies is bigger than he has ever thought. The Kingdom, his ministry, is not just for Jews; it is for all people!

She helps him become aware of the implications of his ministry. You see, the Kingdom of God, and what Messiahship meant did not enter full-blown and fully developed into Jesus' mind at age 12 or even at his baptism. But over time, as Jesus followed the will of God, as he prayed and studied the Scriptures and ministered to hurting people, as he called disciples to follow him and as he dealt with growing opposition. As Jesus was on the move, he learned more and more about who he was and what his ministry was to be.

Part of what Mark shows us is a very human Jesus, who is open to wherever God leads him, and is willing to change his mind. But perhaps we also get a glimpse of a very divine Jesus. What might it mean for one of the very characteristics of who God is, is the willingness to be open and change? I think

Mark, along with the rest of the Bible, shows us that this is who God is because this is who Jesus is. Jesus is open to change and changing his mind.

I also believe it is important to remember that all this happens in between these feeding stories when people are worried about scarcity. There's not enough food to go around, there's not enough healing to go around, there's not enough gifts to go around, there's not enough love to go around ... Scarcity. Not enough. So, after a while we become trained and brainwashed into scarcity thinking about everything.

Brene' Brown says scarcity is "our culture's version of post-traumatic stress. It happens when we've been through too much, and rather than coming together to heal (which requires vulnerability), we're angry and scared and at each other's throats" (*Daring Greatly*, p. 27).

Theologian Walter Brueggemann reminds us that the myth of scarcity is what "drives the Western economy. The myth says there is never enough to go around so our life job is to keep what we have and get more. Protect, seize, guard. It is an act of atheism that is very deep in the practice of much greed, fear, and anxiety." He goes on, "But it is unfaith." It is the opposite of faith in the God of abundance. In the God of grace and generosity and in that grace and generosity and abundance there is an openness to God, to everyone else, to God's wider world and ample ground for sharing (see Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self*, p. 87).

This mixed-race Gentile woman insists with Jesus that his sharing healing with her Gentile community and specifically, with her daughter, will not take away healing from Jesus's community. It won't take any grace from the Jews to share grace with the Gentiles.

“Jesus,” she says, “You can be open to even Gentiles, even mixed-race Syrophoenician women and their daughters. You do not have to be closed to the Other. Don’t let the Roman imperial brainwashing, coupled with religious bigotry prejudice you into being closed. Open up! The grace of God is abundant!”

Mark and Matthew tell us this story, and both are showing us a Jesus who is open because he has this genuine conversation with this woman. Jesus is open to changing his mind. He is open to something God is doing that perhaps catches him by surprise.

One of things, I admire about our 90-year-old George Patterson, with whom we’ll celebrate his birthday after the service, is his continuing openness to what new things God is doing. George is the opposite of the stodgy old guy, set in his ways. Instead, he is open! Ready to take the leap of faith into God’s new initiative. Thanks be to God, for you George!

Back to Mark. Mark says that Jesus then heads across the Sea of Galilee to the Decapolis, the ten Greek speaking cities I mentioned a moment ago. Again, this is border country, full of Gentiles and Jews and mixed-race and pluralistic religious practices. This is not the Bible belt of Judea.

Mark says that a man with both hearing loss and a speech impediment is brought to Jesus, and they beg Jesus to heal the man.

I’ve wondered what it might have been like to be that man. ...

Mary Nixon was a 76-year-old woman who sued the University of Iowa several years ago, for experiments that the university conducted back in 1939. Dubbed now “the Monster Study,” Mary Nixon and several other orphans were subjected to intense psychological battering. For 12 consecutive months back in

the 1930's, Mary endured relentless rapid-fire belittling of her personhood and her speech. This was all done for the sake of trying to induce stuttering in these human guinea pigs.

By today's standards, it was highly unethical science - this taking of minorities, orphans, or others considered to be morally inferior, and experimenting on them.

Mary Nixon suffered lifelong psychological problems. Stutterers tend to avoid eye contact with their listeners. They have irregular breathing patterns. They're typically greatly ashamed of their stuttering. And they have great feelings of worthlessness - incredibly low self-esteem. In short, they have a hard life. A life full of shame, a very lonely and difficult life.

Again, Brene' Brown gives us a definition of shame. Brown is emphatically clear; shame is something we all have one way or another. If we have any empathy, we know about shame. She says, "First, shame is the fear of disconnection. We are psychologically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually hard-wired for connection, love, and belonging." ... Shame says we are "unworthy of connection. ... I'm unlovable. I don't belong" (Brown, *Daring Greatly*, p. 68-69).

Mary Nixon lived a life of shame. I wonder but my guess is that this man brought to Jesus likely had much of the same kind of life. A life of shame, a life of being an outsider, abstracted, and alone.

But Jesus knew what to do with this fellow. He first took the man aside from the crowd that had brought him. Then he poked his finger right in toward the eardrum of the man. But this poking was only half of it. Jesus spit on the man's

tongue and pulled his finger out of the ear long enough to massage the tongue. Then, in what must have seemed to everyone in the vicinity like primal behavior, he GRUNTED! Jesus groaned deeply. He looked up toward heaven as he spoke toward the man: Ephphatha! (effatha) Be Opened!

And the man could suddenly hear. And he could suddenly talk as plainly as all those gawkers who had made a life out of talking about him. All the speech therapists who had worked with him since the second grade were now speechless.

I know the saliva deal sounds a little gross. But evidently that's exactly what was required. And lest it offend any of us too much, let's not forget those times when mother licked her fingers and wiped all that chocolate Oreo goo from around our mouths when we were little.

Jesus looked up to heaven and he groaned deeply. He mysteriously looked up into the clouds before turning to the man and saying out loud: Ephphatha! (effatha) Be Opened!

I remember Anne Lamott's, story of taking her father on errands one day. His brain cancer had progressed to the point where he was reverting to some behaviors of a three-year old. Just before Anne trotted into the local bank one day, she gave Dad a candy bar and strapped him into the passenger seat of her car. There was a huge line at the teller's window where Anne was standing. So, every so often, she would run over to peek out the bank's front window to make sure that Dad was still there ... as if someone was going to kidnap him or something.

She writes: "The last time I looked, he wasn't there. The car was empty. I felt like adrenaline had been injected into my heart. I stared ... out the window and saw this crazy old man pass by the window. His face was smeared with chocolate.

He was just walking on by, holding his candy bar, staring up at the sky as if maybe his next operating instructions were up there.”

Jesus mysteriously stared up at the sky while massaging the tongue and the ears of a man who has been shamed and alone all his life. We don’t know why he was looking up and surveying the clouds. Maybe he was looking for power from God, power he did not have apart from God. Maybe God actually spoke to him at that moment and concurred with him that this particular man’s bondage - his shame - must definitely end.

I’ll tell you what I think. I think Jesus was being reminded of his operating instructions up there. I think that maybe he groaned because he empathized with this man and knew in his own body what it was like to be shamed and an outcast. He took on the man’s suffering. I think Jesus remembered the operating instructions he received from the Syrophoenician woman that God is open. Open to others, open to change. And through this opening God enters into the suffering of others no matter who they are and shares his abundant grace and never-ending love. But at the same time, as we enter into others, we discover that the other person is an opening to God.

Chris Wiman, poet and teacher at Yale Divinity School, who grew up out in West Texas in Snyder, in an article called, “By Love We are Led to God” wrote, “Christ comes alive in the communion between people.” He goes on, “I’m not sure you can have Christian communion with other people without these moments in which sorrow has opened in you and for you.”

Wiman connects human love with God’s love and for him, human love reawakened divine love. For Wiman, the presence of God was dependent upon

being together with another person. In words that have come to mean much to me, Wiman wrote, “I can’t speak for other people. I only know that I did not know what love was until I encountered one that kept opening and opening and opening. And until I acknowledged that what that love was opening onto, and into, was God” (Wiman, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Winter/Spring 2012, “By Love We are Led to God,” p. 29).

So, hear me this morning. When we’re feeding babies but feeling like bricks are on our chest because the world around us is a chaotic swirl of fears. Another storm is coming, and it is hotter than it has ever been and it’s going to get hotter. There’s another school shooting and politicians compete for who can be the meanest and angriest and stupidest, and every fiber of our body tells us to close down, pull the covers over our heads or try to pretend that none of this is happening.

Instead, look up for operating instructions: “Ephphatha! (effatha) Be Opened!” Look into the heart of the person you are with in which love has opened in you and for you and keeps opening and opening and opening, until you know it is opening into God.

Among all people and all time, we – *we* – are alive at this moment that calls for community and creativity and radical change, that calls for God’s abundant love and mercy and grace.

We can either close down or open up and take the leap into it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

