

*Ephphatha*, when translated into Greek (ΕΦΦΑΘΑ), carries the double meaning of being opened and being connected. Throughout his ministry, Jesus forged stronger connections between the divine and the human worlds. Jesus called on his followers to be opened and connected to God, to God's Word, to God's Spirit, and to one another. In our story from Mark 7 we have three examples of Jesus opening and connecting with people, groups, and nations.

The story begins globally with the news that Jesus traveled through the *region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis*. Tyre was the capital city of the ancient Phoenician Kingdom along the Mediterranean Sea. Tyre and its sister city, Sidon (named for the great-grandson of Noah, the ancestor of the Canaanites), were centers of opposition for Israel's enemies. Similarly, the Decapolis - a grouping of ten cities on the eastern side of the Red Sea, along the edge of the Roman Empire - represented Israel's enemies, the Romans, the current masters over Israel.

This story tells us that Jesus was on the move, well beyond the traditional borders of Israel, out among the Gentiles sharing the good news of God's Gospel of love, forgiveness and grace. Such good news was not reserved for the Jews alone, but open to anyone who would hear it and accept it. God's new law of love included everyone: even non-believers and enemies. Jesus opened the way for everyone to reach God.

Jesus opened his heart to connect with people outside the Jewish circles, to build relationships on love and compassion and inclusion, not judgment and criticism and segregation. Jesus opened minds to recognize the radical good news that the God of Creation loved ALL of creation, not just one, special people. Jesus opened his arms to include those who stood outside the pale, those who needed to be healed, and those who were lost.

Likewise, when Jesus encountered the crowd, he opened his heart to them, accepting their plea to help the man born deaf and mute. By his healing power,

Jesus opened the minds of these non-believers to the work and will of God in redeeming and restoring creation. By opening his arms to them, he opened up the way to salvation and new life for all people with God.

We know that their hearts and minds and arms were opened, because it says *then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it* (v. 36). With their worldview opened, their image of God expanded, their faith refreshed, they couldn't help but open their hearts and minds and arms to others. This community encountered the Living God, who opened up to them God's plan and who invited them to partner with God in the redemption of the world.

Lastly, there is the man himself. Deaf and mute, this man stood on the edges of society, marginalized by his inability to communicate with others. Jesus opened his heart to the man, took the man aside, touched his ears and mouth to show what he was about to do, called out *Ephphatha!*, and restored the man's senses of sound and speech.

But Jesus did more than open this man's mind: Jesus blew his mind away! Imagine what life became for this man. Imagine hearing your wife's voice or your children's laughter, or your name spoken for the first time! Imagine being able to ask a question, or express a thought, or order a meal! Imagine saying, "I love you" and hearing it said to you. Imagine your world being opened like that: imagine how an encounter with the Living God can open your life, open your understanding, and open your future.

Being opened is our theme at The Federated Church: Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Arms. You'll see that slogan everywhere today: on t-shirts, banners, bulletins, and brochures. We want to plaster that phrase all over town: we are the church of Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Arms in Fergus Falls. We open ourselves to what God is doing in our neighborhoods, and we open ourselves to the neighbors God puts in our path.

Like the man whom Jesus healed, we will open our hearts to God and to each other; we will open our minds to hear and know God's will for our lives; and we will open our arms to accept God's grace and love so that we can open our arms to share it with others.

Like the crowd that confronted Jesus, this congregation will open its heart to welcome the stranger, the outcast, the sick, the downtrodden, the hungry, the homeless, the child, the poor, the seeker, and the sinner. This congregation will, with open minds, bear witness to the love of God at work in and through us for the restoration of the world. This congregation will serve this community with arms opened wide enough to hug, to heal, and to hold.

Being open to what God is doing in each of us personally, and being open to where God is calling this faith family means moving out into the community expecting to find people and places to serve. It means connecting more deeply with the needs of our neighbors. It means opening our hearts even when they're breaking. It means opening our minds, even when we disagree. It means opening our arms even when they're too full with the demands of life already.

Being open will challenge and stretch us. Being open will also bring God's blessing upon each one of us, upon this congregation, upon this community, and upon God's world. Ephphatha! Be opened! Where might God be calling you today?

Prayer: Lord of life, open us! Pry us open any way you can. Shock, beguile, knock, amaze, squeeze, push, pull, stretch, bend, or twist any way you can to open us. Open us to share the gifts you have given us, and to the deep yearning to share them gladly and boldly. Open us to initiate the exchange of forgiveness, to risk a new beginning free of past grievances, and to find the gifts of a larger love and a deeper peace. Open us so that we may be born anew in the fullness of your image, the fullness of a just and joyful human community, and the fullness of your kingdom in the fullness of time. Amen.

## Ephphatha! Be Opened!

Rally Sunday, September 11, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Mark 7:31-37

"Open sesame!" is a magical phrase from the story of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." Ali Baba says the magic phrase to open the mouth of a cave in which the thieves hid their treasure. Wouldn't it be great to have a magic phrase that opened things? With a magic phrase we could open a stuck window on a hot day; we could open the car door when we lock our keys inside; we could open the operating system or the file or the App without a glitch; we could open the pickle jar easily. We like things to be opened. Being open is very important.

Being "open" is a great theme in Jesus' ministry, too. In Mark 7, we hear how Jesus opened the ears and mouth of a man born deaf and mute with a word. Jesus says, "*Ephphatha!*" (Eff-pha-tha) which means "Be opened!" It's a common Aramaic word - not a magic word - but a powerful word when spoken by Jesus.

The key phrase is verse 34: *Then looking up to heaven, [Jesus] sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.'* Who is the "him" to which Jesus spoke? Is it the man or is it God? I think it's both, because there is a double meaning here. On one level, the command to be opened comes right in the midst of Jesus healing the man who is deaf and mute. The instant Jesus shouts '*Ephphatha!*' the man is healed, his hearing and speech restored, his senses opened.

On another level, however, Jesus is commanding the power of heaven to be opened to us. Jesus looked up to heaven and he sighed one of those prayers for which there are no words. Jesus prayed that the power and grace and love of God might be opened to us, and that we might be more open to what God is doing in, around, and through us.