

***Be Opened!***

Apparently, dogs love hearing aids.

I wish I could tell you that this is an academic point, but it isn't. After I went home on Sunday afternoon a few weeks ago, when I nodded off for what we clergy call the *Sacred Nap*, that most blessed of Sunday afternoon experiences for preachers, I awoke to find my hearing aid in tiny bits on the floor. Apparently, I had knocked it off the nightstand when I reached to turn off the lamp, and one of my dogs made quick work of it.

I also wish I could tell you that this is *first* time this has happened.

A hearing aid makes a huge difference in my life, but by and large, I have an easy time of coping with hearing loss.

That is, of course, until I have to do without my hearing aid. That throws a kink into my easy-going relationship with disability. When a hearing aid shuts down by natural processes or by my dog, I am reminded very quickly how incredibly dependent I am upon this tiny lump of plastic and circuitry.

Such a realization of human limitations quickly renders such stories as our healing story today more poignant, somehow.

We forget, some of us, the limitations our bodies place on us – until we can't forget them.

Do you wear glasses? Can you read or drive without them? Have you had a hip replaced? I understand that by the time it is time to have a joint replaced, nobody ever has to be talked into it. Do you struggle with Adult Attention Deficit Disorder? Imagine life without your medication. It would not take very long, I suspect, for most of us to locate our Achilles heel, the point where we would struggle. Coping mechanisms may have enabled us to get through life; glasses, hearing aids, canes, walkers and medication, but if anyone has dealt with a serious disability, then they know what it is like to ponder life without help.

The stories of Jesus are *full* of healings, but I wonder how many of us are really comfortable with those stories? Do we often *sit* with these stories, thinking of what they can tell us?

Perhaps we find the contemplation of *healing* disconcerting because our experiences with faith and healing are so very caricatured...folks of a certain age will remember when channel surfing would take us past the healing segments of the televangelist's shows. Well, maybe that's just the south, but let me tell you, it's like watching a train wreck. You couldn't *not* watch. Those televangelism healing shows would leave me with my blood boiling, the way I perceive that those shows are taking advantage of folks who need help, real help.

But I shouldn't be too quick to judge. Maybe you remember the old Steve Martin movie, *Leap of Faith*, from few years back when the con-artist preacher accidentally healed someone and it yanked the rug right out from under him.

Or maybe you don't believe in healing. That would be easy enough also. If you've wanted it long enough, waited for it long enough, hoped for it hard enough but it didn't come, maybe you don't believe in healing. I couldn't blame you.

Perhaps *you* have experienced the miraculous. That happens too. Some folks *do* experience divine healing, and they know it, and they give thanks for it – and just because we haven't experienced something ourselves does not mean we should doubt it in the experience of others.

The thing is, if you live long enough, you will find some point of weakness. It will happen. That's not a threat, it's just the truth. It's the way our world works. Bodies wear out. Minds dull with time. Nerves fray and the signal gets lost. Bruises happen to the psyche. Emotions get hurt. If we are really honest with ourselves, eventually, all of us are going to find a point of weakness.

The point of weakness is where these healing stories have something to say to us.

By this point in our story, Jesus has been wandering, and I do mean wandering, around in Gentile territory for a good long time. He is taking a trip that scholars have described as being the equivalent of going from Houston to Chicago with a stop off in Anchorage, and a day trip to Montreal in between. He has been all over the place, lingering, perhaps even loitering.

I am aware that I have already made this point with you, but the thing about the Gospel is that when it wants to make a point, it makes it over and over and over so that we will get it. So, though the form of this story is that of a healing, it is primarily about restoration. It is about restoring people to wholeness and community. I checked a half a dozen scholars on this to make sure I was not just grinding my own theological axes at your expense, but they all seem to agree on this: one chapter earlier, Jesus declared all food clean. Then in this chapter with the Syrophenician woman and this gentile deaf-mute man, he declares all *people* clean.

But healing goes deeper than the body, and deeper than the individual.

This is a story of Jesus healing the expectations that the grace of God is just for a few, of Jesus healing the expectations that he is going to favor one person over another. This is a story of Jesus healing the expectation that you or I aren't worth his time and love. When he starts touching his tongue and sticking his fingers in his ears, Jesus is looking to make some significant changes.

It is to all of the broken and pained expectations in our lives that Jesus declares, "Be opened!" Whatever it is standing between you and wholeness, let it go. Whatever it is that is standing between you and the good news of God's love, lay it down, give it to God. It is to the point of our deepest weakness that Jesus says simply, "Be opened."

Be opened. Be opened to God's way: To love and truth and light, and yes, *hope*. Be opened to the truth that hope is a gift and that God loves us enough to promise us that whether the physical gets dealt with now or in the life that is to come, we *will* be made whole.

Wholeness, after all, is really what we are hoping for. That is what biblical Christian faith is all about: The restoration of wholeness, and the hope, the faith that God is going to make it all creation come around right someday.

Because, after all, it is God's world in which we live.

That's gospel. That is fundamentally good news.

But now we have to deal with that bit about the Syrophenician woman.

I'll be upfront with you, I don't like this text, but at the same time I love it.

I don't like this text because it seems to me as I read it, that perhaps Jesus would have done well to say nothing and simply get on with the healing. I don't like this text because it doesn't fit any easy interpretation. But I love this text because it forces me – it forces all of us – to think again about what we think about Jesus.

I went to read what the scholars wrote about her. Nobody could tell me why Jesus said what he said to her. I can't see now how calling somebody a dog was okay.

That is the discomfort of this text.

That is the place where we are left without easy answers. The Bible doesn't tell us why Jesus changed his mind, it only tells us that he did.

That alone is enough to make anyone uncomfortable. Trust me, I get it. There are days when what we need from the Gospel is comfort, not challenge. And when we want or need challenge, we want it with certainty, not wrapped up in questions.

And yet, here is a story of Jesus changing his mind, and calling a woman a dog as he does it.

Up to this point, Jesus has been breaking all the right boundaries. He has hung out in graveyards, associated with the mentally ill, and engaged in deep conversation with women – all of which would make him ritually unclean - and he has done so eyeing the Pharisees all the while. It's like you or me pulling up to a stoplight, making eye-contact with a state trooper, unbuckling our seatbelts, flooring it through the red-light and weaving through traffic over the double yellow line. You don't do something like that unless you intend to make a point.

Everything Jesus does is meant to make a point.

Up to this point, In Mark's Gospel account, Jesus has primarily been a reformer within Judaism. He is calling on members of his own faith to get their eyes on the ball, so to speak. But when this woman comes along, she has everything Jesus is looking for in a follower, everything but the right pedigree and the right gender. She asks this question, she makes this entreaty, and

Jesus reverts back to the calling he understood, to be a reformer, to get the chosen back on track. And so, he puts her off.

And that is when she, in the words of my friend Brian Blount, “Busts back *bad* on Jesus.” She acknowledges the insult and everything implied with it, and then she renews her plea for healing for her daughter.

I’ve wondered through the years if this isn’t *the* seismic shift of Jesus’ ministry. Mark most definitely presents Jesus in the most human terms of any of the Gospel writers. If you want certainty, read John. But Mark leaves us wondering about Jesus’s emerging identity as Messiah. Indeed, Jesus confounds even his own disciples with his secrecy about it. So far, he has done everything he was called to do: He’s preaching, teaching, healing, confronting, and he’s doing it to all the right people, staying within the context of Judaism. And then this woman confronts him. It’s clear in his response that until this moment, he has viewed his calling to be the messiah for the Jews. His actions have pressed them, his conversations have pushed them, right up to this opening story in chapter 7 when Jesus starts talking to the Pharisees about purity and finally wraps it up declaring all foods clean. It’s as though he’s on the cusp of breaking through, and then, right on time, this gentile Syrophoenician woman shows up to challenge the prevailing view on *people*.

Immediately after he is done with *this* healing, *then* Jesus goes on to the Decapolis, a group of ten Gentile towns, and there heals the deaf man. The one sets the stage for the other.

I want to ask you something, and you don’t have answer me, but I really want us to think about it: what does this story say to us?

That is a question we have to leave troublingly open.

I like what William Sloan Coffin has had to say through the years, that God provides maximum support and minimum control, so that we trust that God is there and living and loving us, but we also trust that we’ve got to live ourselves, and well, there’s going to be some growing pains along the way, and some scars and infections and we’ll probably get hurt from time to time, but that through it all, God will be with us. Through it all, God is there, saying, “Be Opened!”

There is so much that we won’t know about God, and how God works, and what God is up to. The risk we run when we try to say too much is that we will say it wrong. Some things are God’s business and we ought not make too many assumptions and generalizations. But we can say this: God is good. And God loves us.

The bad thing about talking about miracles and healings is that we can’t know it all, but we *can* know these things, and they bear repeating: God is good, and God loves us.

I would love to be able to wrap this story up neatly and present it as a cohesive package, a power-point, if you will, on God’s ways and means. But we can’t do that. The same word that

comforts us also challenges our thinking. But when we say that God loves us and God is good, we are saying a lot. We are saying everything that really matters.

I'm coming to believe that about the only thing we can get really wrong is to underestimate God's love for us and what God has done for us. If we can wrap our brains around the reality that God has claimed us and loved us and will be there for us, and is there for others – if we can say that, we will have said everything that really matters.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.