

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18b  
Isaiah 35:4-7a  
Psalm 146  
James 2:1-10, 14-17  
Mark 7:24-37

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I have a really great word for you today. It's an Aramaic word, which is the language Jesus spoke. The word is **Ephphatha** (say it together). It's a fun word to say. Fun to spell too... *ephphatha*.

The word **Ephphatha** means **be opened**, or more precisely, **open up!** because it is a command. Jesus says **Ephphatha** when he heals a man cannot hear. In fact, it might have been the first word that man ever did hear: **Ephphatha! Open up!** And that man's ears did **open up**, he could hear and he could also speak plainly, without an impediment. Actually his whole life **opened up** as a result of Christ's healing power. He was beside himself with joy, and all the people were astounded. Jesus told them to keep it to themselves, but they just couldn't. The Bible says *just as much as Jesus tried to quiet them, just as much more they kept on spreading the good news around*. They praised God, they evangelized like crazy. They were all taken over by the **Ephphatha** spirit – they were **opened up** in way nothing could close down. Their joyful, open spirit launched Jesus into a major ministry with the Gentile people.

Yes, that's a big deal about this scripture which might not be obvious at first. Everyone in these healing stories was Gentile – they were not Jewish, not God's chosen people. But how did Jesus, who was a Jew, get involved with these unclean outsiders? Before this, Jesus had stuck with healing his own people, the children of Israel.

But in the stories we read today, Jesus experienced a genuine change of mind. Jesus himself caught the **Ephphatha** spirit. He heard a new call to **open up!** and share God's healing power with all people, not just people like him.

Jesus' mind was **opened up** by a pagan woman from Syria. She was clever – in fact, she was the only person in the Bible who ever won a debate with Jesus, male or female. She wasn't Jewish, but she modeled the best values of God's reign. Love was her driving force. She had strong faith in God's healing power. She was loyal, compassionate, humble, and above all she was persistent in begging Jesus to heal her daughter.

At first Jesus put off her request in a cruel way. He called to mind the image of a peasant house where children might be sitting at the table, while drooling dogs hovered around

them looking for scraps (these were not pet dogs but strays, street dogs, scavengers crowding the children). And Jesus put the question: *“How could it be right to throw the children of Israel’s food to some filthy scavenging dogs?”* It was an ugly slur, calling this foreign mother a dog. But she was not put off. She chose her words cleverly, she was bold yet humble in formulating her reply. She admitted that yes, she might be a scavenger... she might be something like a puppy under a table, scavenging for just a scrap of healing that had been intended for others... yet surely Jesus could share just that tiny scrap, a tiny scrap of healing for her tiny child.

Hearing her speak, something shifted in Jesus. He began to **open up**. It was almost like you could see him pause for a beat, then nod. He met her eyes and announced, *“Woman, for saying that, you may go. The demon has left your daughter.”* Then Jesus headed off to heal a bunch more Gentiles.

It was an **Ephphatha** moment. Jesus **opened up**. He **opened up** to God’s wider plan to love and save all people, not just some. Jesus **opened up** more deeply to his own calling to heal all things, in every way possible. A mission of healing that would lead him all the way to the cross.

It is so important to realize that Jesus himself needed to shift – he needed to **be opened**. It was helpful for the disciples to see this and learn from it, and us too. In this story we can watch Jesus **open up** and we can try to do the same ourselves.

As Christ’s disciples we are called to **be opened**. Our life’s calling is to **be opened** to whatever needs healing in this world God loves. We are called to **open up** to God’s gifts of healing for ourselves, for others and for our planet.

We spend so much of our lives shut down and shut off. We armor ourselves up against whatever we think might threaten or hurt us. We allow suspicions and prejudice to shut us off from others. We choose to protect our psyches from the great needs around us, whether it’s people living on the street or people repeatedly injured by racism. It’s a way of preserving ourselves, or so we think.

Yet Christ calls us to **be opened**. **Open up** our eyes and ears and hearts and pocketbooks and social circles. **Open up** to needs and struggles we might prefer to ignore. **Open up** to people we once considered “the other.”

If Jesus can **be opened**, then we can **be opened** too – to be a vehicle of God’s grace in more situations.

To **be opened** is to admit, I don't have all the answers. I am teachable. I would like things to be different than they are today. I would like this world to be healed, for the human family to be healed.

To **be opened** is to realize, I don't have to be right. I can make mistakes. I can try out new and more healing ways of being with others. To say "I'm open to that" means, I'm open to a new perspective, I'm willing to be changed by you.

When we are tense, we can't **be open**. Studies show that when a white person is in the presence of a black person, they often feel fearful, and their body becomes rigid. It may not be a conscious response, but it is real and stands in the way of compassion and connection. In the worst situations it leads to violence. A therapist named Resmaa Menakem has done some powerful work around racism and physical tension. He teaches people to recognize their response and breathe into it, relax. Staying **open** physically helps us **be opened** to each other in all sorts of ways. (Colleagues highly recommend Resmaa Menakem's book, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*)

**Opening up** doesn't happen all at once. It's a step by step process, as we work to overcome what is very often fear standing in our way.

A friend described how she watched a horse handler assist an animal that was gripped by fear. This horse had been traumatized in the past, and now it was terrified to go into a particular room in the barn, where it needed to go to be washed and tended to. As the horse balked and skittered, the trainer worked slowly and patiently to get the horse to take just one step in the right direction. She explained it this way: *Every step is an education.*

*Every step is an education*, as we learn to **be opened** in the face of forces that would polarize and divide us. **Be opened** to a new future as we move through this pandemic, two steps forward and one step back this fall. *Every step is an education* in **being opened** to God's love that accepts us no matter what and goes with us no matter where. **Opened up** to the healing God wants to offer us, and offer through us. **Opened up** even to God's healing for the whole planet.

Today we remember and grieve how a year ago, wildfires burned over a million acres of land and towns in Oregon. The cities of Phoenix, Talent, Detroit, Gates, Blue River, and much of Vida were left in ashes. The fires are back this year, and even this morning, smoke hangs on Portland's horizon to remind us how all things are connected. We dare not ignore the signs.

Scientists see the influence of both global warming and unwise human practices. Since the 1800s, white settlers in the West have suppressed fires that would naturally clear out forest undergrowth. 150 years of fire-suppression has led to denser forests, which along with climate change and hot, dry summers has resulted in much larger, hotter fires. Climate change has also warmed our oceans, causing hurricanes like Ida to intensify quickly, gathering energy as they move over warm waters toward coastlines. Extreme weather is a warning sign – a call to **open up** and realize our planet is in danger, and God calls us to be agents of healing.

**Opening up** to God's healing for creation means fighting against denial, refusing to ignore this hard reality. It means **opening up** to both great and small actions to lead us forward, from international agreements to our own household conservation. **Opening up** also means staying open to hope and never giving up. This week I read that the world has finally stopped using leaded gasoline – it took 50 years -- too long -- but that poison is now out of circulation. We can change, and we must. I read too that land managers in California are **opening up** to learn from fire practices in Florida, where for centuries landowners and communities have regularly practiced prescribed burns to keep forests healthy, following the wisdom of Native Americans before them. In the Southeast, it's an accepted part of the culture with legal frameworks to permit and support it. If Westerners like us can overcome their cultural prejudices to join forces with Southerners, for the good of God's fruitful earth, then that really could be a sign of hope. Something good may be **opening up**.

(See article by naturalist Travis Houle, Summer 2018 in Holden Village Voice; *How Climate Change Is Fueling Hurricanes Like Ida* [link here](#) at npr.org 8/30/2021 ; *Why The South Is Decades Ahead Of The West In Wildfire Prevention* [link here](#) at npr.org 8/31/2021; *The World Has Finally Stopped Using Leaded Gasoline. Algeria Used The Last Stockpile* [link here](#) at npr.org 8/30/2021)

We will need many more **Ephphatha** moments to follow where God's Spirit is leading, but God does lead, and God keeps on helping us to shift, to **open up** in expansive love.

Let us close in prayer: *Loving God, you created the world and sent your own Son to live among us, made of the same stuff, breathing the same air, marveling at sunrise and sunset just as we do. It is your will to heal us, heal all people, and heal the whole planet earth. Help us to participate in the life around and within us as your life, as you living in us and we living in you and in each other. God of life, teach us to love all that you have created, caring for the earth as your gift and our home.*

*In the name of Christ, Amen.*