



“Be Opened!”

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Mark 7: 31-37

by the Rev. Dr. Stacy C. Smith

Before I begin this morning, I just want to let you know that in this sermon, I will briefly mention some possible physical abuse by a teacher to a student. It will be brief and not integral for the overall point of the sermon, but I do want to just let you all know that will be a part of the conversation.

So now, let us pray. Lord may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This is the second week of our short tour through the healing miracles in the Gospel of Mark, and we're looking yet again at a slightly strange healing miracle that happens only in this gospel. In last week's miracle, Jesus heals a blind man, and this week we have a deaf man. Not only that, but he can't speak very well, maybe he stutters. And once again Jesus does some miracle magic on him – and once again, he uses spit, which is just kinda gross but it's how Jesus gets the job done, so who are we to judge? And then the man is healed.

And I know I mentioned last week that these healing scriptures are sometimes a little tough for me, and maybe they are for you. But as I was deciding about the sermon for this week, I felt pretty confident that I could draw a sermon out of this story, that it should be fairly easy to preach on.

And that's because to heal the deaf man, Jesus uses his hands, and he utters this deep sigh, and he uses, you know, spit, and then uses this word that he doesn't use anywhere else in scripture, Ephaphatha, Be Opened! *Ephaphatha*, what a lovely idea. Be Opened. Be Open, to the healing in your life, to the miracle awaiting you, to the new thing that God may be doing. Be Open. So I think, this is great, I can preach on this. I wrote this hymn a few years ago about this text and we'll sing it in a minute, and so I think, certainly I can find a way to talk about being open to Christ, how Christ makes us open up to difficult things, how Christ helps us shed the things that are keeping us closed off, making us deaf, rendering us mute. This will work.

Except it doesn't. I can't think of anything much I want to say about being open. I've got a nice idea, a nice title, a nice hymn, a nice hook, but I don't really have all that much to say about it. Be Opened. Be Open. Yeah, I got nothing.

So in effort to actively procrastinate the sermon, I utilize the best tool available: social media. So I'm scrolling through Facebook, past political articles and baby pictures and people selling their dining room tables, and I end up on one of the most deadly zones in all of the Book: my high school graduating class Facebook group.

Now, this may come as a shock to many of you, but I was not particularly popular in high school. In fact, my high school experience was pretty bleak. I wouldn't say it was terrible, but just not that great. I was a dork and a music nerd and a very opinionated Protestant at a school made up of a lot of athletes and a lot of Catholics. So over the years I have not pursued many relationships with people I knew in high school. That was made pretty easy by the fact that I moved away after college, while most people I know from high school stayed in Dallas.

And as they have all grown up and had families and hung out with each other, I have pretty much stayed away. I didn't have any desire to go to my 10 year reunion, or my 20th reunion, or yet another reunion someone is planning next year for reasons I do not really understand. And when Facebook became the primary way of keeping up with people and someone started a group for alums, I joined reluctantly, mainly so I could keep an eye on where people were so I might avoid running into them. You know, keep your friends close and your enemies closer, that kind of thing. A few people I did like sent me friend requests and I accepted them, but when those random folks, the popular ones, the ones that were mean or rude to me and my little tribe of high school weirdos, when they would send me a friend request, I took perhaps a little too much delight in clicking NO, they are not my friend, they never were, and they never would be.

Now, one of the people I did like in high school, William, took a slightly different approach. William, as I describe him, is my gay, black prom date. William is in fact gay, and black, and we went to school together at a very white, very Catholic high school in the nineties, so things were pretty tough for him. He and I were best friends and we did go to prom together, he was the drum major and I was the dance team captain, we were in show choir together and he was the President of the National Honor Society and I was the Vice-President – and I don't know how things were at your high school, but absolutely none of those activities made me or William cool.

But while I stayed away from really any thoughts about high school, William actively engages them and he has a great memory. On our alumni Facebook page, he often brings up things that happened in high school, both positive and negative. He clearly

processes some of the difficult, even horrible, things that he endured throughout our high school years by talking about them, and he has a much better, and much longer, memory than I do.

And it just so happened that, the other day, while I was diligently procrastinating this very sermon, he was processing one of those things that happened. William posted a note to all 200 of us in our alumni group about a teacher at our school who was somewhat notorious for his inappropriate behavior. Now, this teacher, this man died a while ago I have no idea the extent of his abuse, but it was always rumored that he did some inappropriate things, and he was just known for being off. And William brought up a situation in which this teacher threw a student into a locker. And then another guy from high school, Tyson Theilan, made a comment on Facebook about it.

Now Tyson was one of those guys that I especially didn't want to connect with, that I had no need or desire to be Open to. In high school he was popular and good looking and played football, and therefore always kind of a jerk to me. I don't remember anything specific that he did, but he was part of that group of guys, and they were mean and crass and I didn't like him then and I don't now. So William makes the post about this teacher slamming a student into a locker, and Tyson replies to it and says to William, basically, who cares that this ever happened, and that William should just get over it.

Well, that sent me rolling. William has as much right as anyone to bring up potential abuse that happened to him and others in high school, even if it was 20 years ago, and where does Tyson get off telling William he should be over anything? Did he ever get snubbed by the cool kids? Did he ever get slammed into lockers? Did he ever have to put up with the whispers and the remarks and the staying home from the dances because he wasn't cool enough to get asked? NO. So - and mind you, I am supposed to be writing a sermon about Jesus at the time - I decided to do what any self-respecting, self-righteous, overly-educated pastor lady would do in this situation. I picked a nasty little fight.

So to Tyson's comment, I typed this: "Well, I don't remember what William is talking about but I'm glad to see that Tyson is still a jerk. Now I don't have to go to the next reunion." I know, snarky and mean and cutting all at the same time. Really well done. And I paused for a moment, and thought, should I do this, and then I thought, oh yes I should, and I hit Post. And then I sat back to see what kind of impact my snarky comment would make in the larger land of Facebook.

Now, this whole time I am supposed to be writing a sermon about how Jesus teaches us to Be Open. And to my credit, the irony of this is not lost on me. I'm trying to write a

sermon about *ephphatha*, about letting go, about being open to the new thing that God is doing in our life, but I JUST CAN'T. The wounds of the past are too deep. Because once again, just like all those times in high school, someone I love and care for is trying to speak up about bad things that happened to him and to others, and some smug, blonde football guy is trying to tell him that his feelings are not important and he should just get over it.

Except this time around, I'm not a nervous sixteen year old kid, and I don't care what he or anyone else thinks, I'm going to call him a jerk for everyone to see, and my unwritten sermon will just have to stay that way because, on this random Wednesday morning from the seat of pastoral authority which I now wield, I am going to strike a chord of justice for all the nerds and the freaks and the people who get slammed into lockers. Forget *ephphatha*, forget being open, forget the sermon. It's almost better, I think, to be filled with righteous anger than to be open to interpretations that would expose me to the pain I have carried around since adolescence. And while Jesus might have died for the bullies, he also turned over the tables of the moneychangers, and so I will I. I'm out to get Tyson Thielan because that guy has it coming.

And so I sit back. Not much happens for a while, but then I see it: Tyson Thielan has mentioned you in a Comment. And I'm like, Bring It On, and I click on the link. And this is word for word what he says: "[William](#), I didn't mean to diminish your experience by my comment last night. I apologize for saying what I said. [Stacy](#), if I was a jerk to you then I'm sorry. It probably wasn't intentional. I thought I got along with everyone pretty well. I hope you do come to the reunion. I've reconnected with a few people I had lost touch with from high school over the past year, and it's a lot of fun seeing their families and what they are doing now. I hope you and your family are doing well. If I remember right your dad had that old pink convertible. I thought that was pretty cool."

I mean, the convertible was red, but still... Oh. My. God. Literally, oh my God. Of all people, Tyson Theilan has now completely schooled me about *ephathatha*, about being open. He acknowledged what he said was wrong, and he apologized for it. He even apologized to me for doing something that neither of us could even remember. He extended a hand of friendship to me, he reminded me that there were people in high school who I did like and who are living wonderful lives, and he remembered something about my family that was cool, and was special.

From my perch, I had thrown my best, my cattiest snark at him and he responded with kindness and grace. And then all these thoughts come to my head: I seem to remember that Tyson had gone to an middle school that specialized in helping students with learning disabilities. Maybe, just maybe, that made high school hard for him too. And

maybe he's different than he was twenty years ago, maybe he's actually not a jerk, maybe he never was, maybe...I was? The prospect is too horrible to even contemplate, but there it is in black and white for all of Facebook to read. So what do I do now? I have to acknowledge it. So I replied back and said, "Thank you so much for your words. Obviously I don't have a strong desire to reconnect with many folks from high school, but I appreciate your kind words and I take them to heart." Look, it was all I could muster, it was all the openness, all the ephphatha, that I had in me.

And then all of the sudden I had my sermon. Being open, you know, it's very easy to say, but much, much harder to do. I can preach about being open to change, being open to love, being open to forgiveness, being open to healing, being open to Jesus, but being open to high school? That takes some serious faith.

We have these narratives we carry around, the stories of our lives, of who we are, of how we got this way, our deafness, our muteness, our scars, our learnings. And lots of times they are correct. And sometimes they're not, and even more of the time, they change. But it's not easy. It took Jesus's hands, and his spit, a loud groan, and an exclamation that he only says this one time to get this man to open up, to enable him to really hear what's going on around him, and for him to start speaking.

I don't know you all well enough yet to surmise what your "high school" might be, although for lots of it is probably, actually high school. But there are these things we are closed off to because it's more comfortable, or it's a part of the story you tell yourself to make you feel whole, or maybe it just takes too much energy to consider how you could even endeavor to open yourself up to it. Maybe it's something here at church, some new idea or calling or mission that you have been avoiding. Maybe it's being open to people who don't align with your political beliefs, who don't like the same music you do, who don't parent their kids the ways you think are best. Maybe it's pushing ourselves to be open to the ways that gender expression is developing and occurring among many young people. Trust me, that can be difficult for many of us to understand, but maybe, just maybe, it's even harder for the child or the youth who is struggling mightily to figure themselves out...and maybe even doing that in toughest of places... high school.

It is not an easy thing, to be open. It means questioning our beliefs, naming our sins, forgiving others, deciding that the pain we're comfortable with is less desirable than the healing we might encounter. But when we do believe, when we let Christ's healing into our lives, we are opened up in the wildest, weirdest, most unlikely of places.

I'm not saying that I'm open to going to the reunion. Like the blind man from last week, I might be hearing things a little bit differently but I don't hear them all the way clearly,

at least not yet. But maybe *ephaphatha*, being opened up by Christ, being willing to hear and see the new thing that God is doing, maybe that means looking a little differently at the things that hurt us in the past, and being willing to let a little of our pain go by the side. Being open to Tyson, being open to Christ, being open to healing - perhaps they're all the same thing.

Ephaphatha. Be Opened! May it be so. Amen.