

## Reflection for 5 September 2021—Ephphatha: Be Opened!

James 2:1–10, (11–13), 14–17      Faith without works is dead.

Mark 7:24–37

A woman's faith challenges Jesus.

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There were two stories in our Gospel reading today. That's no accident. There is a theme that links them. Not only are they both healing stories; they are both about hearing and speaking. In both, someone is given the ability to hear and speak in a way that they can be understood.

In the second story that second theme is obvious. A deaf man with a speech impediment is healed. "Ephphatha," Jesus says to him. "Be opened." And that's what happens. His ears are opened, his tongue released. The man then "speaks plainly."<sup>i</sup> For a long time no one has been able to make out what he is saying when he speaks, but now he can tell it like it is.

Wow, do I EVER identify with his story! As most of you know, I have a disability which affects my voice, making me difficult to understand. It is called spasmodic dysphonia, one of the spastic dystonias. It has gotten quite bad over the summer and I am not yet willing right now to have my vocal chords injected with botox—the organism that causes a deadly form of food poisoning. I have not been willing to risk that recently because the anaesthesia injection paralyzes my throat so that I aspirate liquid. That is dangerous, especially during COVID.

Without my voice, it is difficult to be your minister. I still feel intensely called to this work, but sometimes, it is difficult. Sometimes, people cannot understand me on the phone. Seniors especially cannot understand me. And that is an important part of our congregation. At a retirement facility several years ago, as I walked away from two gents I had just visited, one remarked loudly to the other: she sure is sweet, but I can't understand a word she says. My heart sank. I knew it was an exaggeration, because he had responded appropriately to things I said in the conversation. But there was truth in what he said—I AM hard to understand.

I have heard similar from some of you, especially those who are hard of hearing. YOU can help by turning up your hearing aids and turning up the volume on your phone.

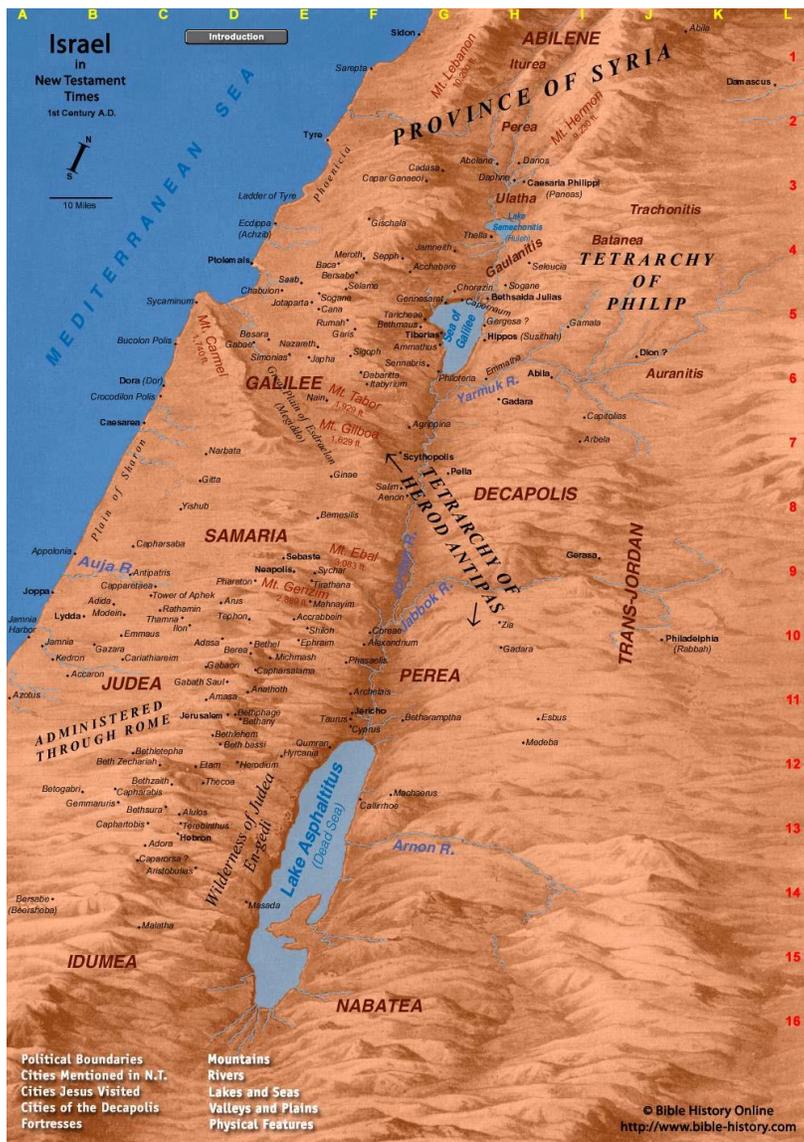
It is embarrassing and marginalizing to sound like this.

We usually try **not** to say things that are hurtful to or about people who are differently abled or physically or mentally challenged—or just different from us in some way. But,

for some reason, when a person sounds strange, as I do, people often avoid us, don't include us, treat us as if our disability has affected our intelligence. In the past, people who were mute were often called dumb: "deaf and dumb." Without a voice, sometimes it feels like one's opinions are not respected as they once were.

The woman in the first story did not have a voice in society; her opinions were not respected for another reason. And it related to Jesus' rudely likening her to a dog.

To understand this, we need to know a bit of history and geography.<sup>ii</sup> Jesus is in the region of Tyre, we are told. If you look at the map below, you'll see that Tyre is to the north of Israel, and it's in the land of the Phoenicians.



Tyre was a thriving international sea-port; the Phoenicians had always been great maritime traders and people from all over the world came through Tyre. It was multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-everything sort of place. Kind of like Toronto. It was just the kind of place which good Jewish people were taught to avoid in Jesus' time.

In Tyre you'd certainly come face to face with foreign gods, foreign customs, foreign food, things which Jewish people wouldn't just have found strange, but "unclean." So what's Jesus doing there?

He may have been trying to get away from trouble in Galilee. He had been arguing with the religious authorities, challenging their interpretation of the law, and things were starting to get heated. So he is heading off to have some R&R.

He is heading out from a land where he feels at home into one where he definitely won't, where he is sure to

encounter things that will challenge and disturb him. And he does, in the person of a woman.

We don't know much about the woman who comes to him to beg for her daughter's healing, but what we do know is important.

She is a Gentile, not a Jew, so we can assume she worships the gods of Phoenicia. She seems to come to Jesus alone, which was uncommon. Respectable women mostly stayed at home. Their husbands, fathers or brothers spoke for them, especially to complete strangers. But where is the man who should be speaking for her? Where is the child's father? She might be widowed, but the Bible usually tells us if this is the case. Perhaps the father was a sailor or a trader, long disappeared over the horizon, just passing through. Whatever the story, the fact that she comes to Jesus herself, and on her own, tells us that there is something about her background that is "sketchy."

Sure enough, Jesus acts like a man from his culture. His first response to her is quite rude. Some have suggested he is just engaging in playful banter, testing this woman's faith with his talk of feeding dogs—essentially calling HER a dog. But you don't playfully banter with someone whose little daughter is desperately ill—that would reflect even more badly on Jesus.

What a woman this is! She responds to Jesus with the deference expected of her: "Sir... " she begins. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." (Jesus' people often called themselves the children of Israel.) Her respectful, but clever reply to the racist slur that Jesus probably learned as a village child ... opens **his** ears.

So here's where we come back to the theme that unites the two stories in today's Gospel. The theme about hearing and speaking. In the second story Jesus heals a deaf man so that he can hear and "speak rightly." But it seems that before Jesus can do that, he has to **have his own ears opened and learn to speak rightly** himself.

This determined, desperate UN-NAMED Syrophoenician woman's words change Jesus' ministry, just as Jesus' words change her life and the life of her child. Because of her, Jesus learns that his message is as much for the Gentiles as for the Jews. There's a suggestion that he puts that lesson into practice right away, because the deaf man he heals may well be a Gentile too. He lives in the Decapolis, the ten Greek towns on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, founded by Alexander the Great.

This Syrophoenician woman has taught him that he is just as likely to find God at work in these places as he is in the heartlands of Jewish faith.

For that reason, these are important stories for us. We like to think of ourselves as open, caring, tolerant people. But there are still some people whose voices we fail to hear, people we dismiss as having nothing to say that's worth hearing, people whom we **haven't even noticed** are trying to speak. We may be deaf to certain groups who seem different to us. We may miss the voices of the poor, or close our ears to the rich, assuming they know nothing about our struggles. We may write off those older than us

as hopelessly out of date, or those younger than us as naïve. We talk **over** people, blocking out what they are saying. Or we sometimes speak **for** them, rather than letting them speak for themselves, and trusting that they know their own truths.

This week many of us have had our ears opened yet again to the voices of refugees, wondering if perhaps there is something we might do to help.

Do you remember the shocking picture of a drowned toddler named Aylan back in 2015? It took that photo to forge that human connection. Listen to this week's gospel reference in this poem about Aylan written by Laura Tharion:<sup>iii</sup>

So you lie dead, curled in the sand  
in your poppy red shirt,  
and little brown shoes,  
laced lovingly by fearful hands,  
who faced a paper boat and  
the cold embrace of a soulless ocean  
as the safest cradle offered.  
Hands that dared hope  
you would walk again on soft green grass,  
and paddle laughing in the licking shallows  
of a sun-kissed beach,  
not facedown cold  
with flooded lungs.

And we have room.  
Room in the corner of our eyes  
for a budding tear,  
quickly uprooted.  
Room in our newsfeed for  
a momentarily gutting photo.  
Room in our graveyards.  
But we don't have room in our homes,  
room in our schools,  
room to push you smiling on a swing  
inside our playgrounds.  
We don't have room in our hearts.

We don't care that you are dead.  
We care only for the inconvenience of  
our own discomfort,<sup>iv</sup>  
relieved to no longer need  
to sacrifice the crumbs you would  
have quietly gathered from beneath

our bloated tables,  
or endure your living presence  
enrage our blind and hungry god  
of economic growth.  
We are vacuous,  
but we have no room.  
So you lie curled in the sand,  
in your little brown shoes.

It seems to me that our deafness to each other—conscious or unconscious—usually springs from fear; fear that giving ground to others, giving space in our lives and the life of our church—will leave us without what we need for ourselves. Or just fear because they are different from us in some way.

Jesus' own concern seems to be that if he gives his attention to Gentiles, there won't be enough for the people of Israel. But the woman's response reminds him that there's no need to ration the love of God. There is plenty to go around; the children have enough and more to spare. Only those who know they have plenty to eat would let scraps fall to the floor for the dogs.

The message that there is enough for all is central to Jesus' teaching, but it seems that even he needed to be reminded of it sometimes. And if he did, then surely we do too.

I have been thinking about the size of the house Stephen and I live in, with two offices and an extra bedroom—full of stuff we don't need or use. And an insulated shed in our backyard that families I met in Palestine or Africa would be glad to live in.

Perhaps God sent us our own Syrophenician woman in the recent request from a Muslim neighbour to help him get his mother, brother, and pregnant sister-in-law to Canada? The request is only to use our connection to The United Church of Canada's relationship to the Canadian government as a Sponsorship Agreement Holder. It will not involve EPUC money nor commit volunteer labour. Might this opportunity to smooth the way for folks to come to Canada to keep them from being sent back to war-torn Yemen remind us that it is safe to let go of our own fears, because our God is infinitely bigger and far more generous than we can imagine?

Today's reading from the book of James ended: "judgement will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.

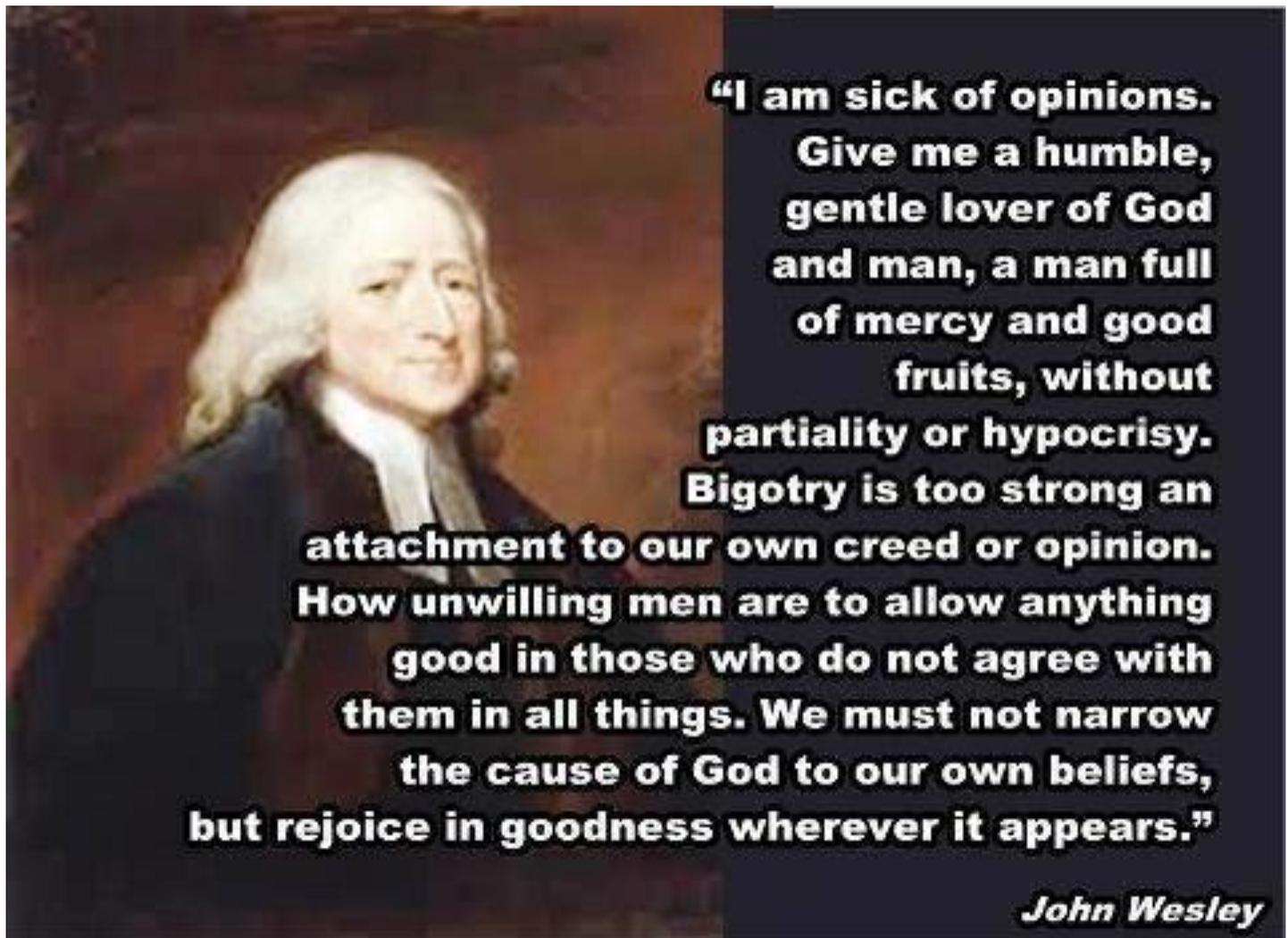
14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you

do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

The 20<sup>th</sup> century neo-liberal theologian Karl Barth supposedly told someone who was interviewing him that his theological interpretation was always done with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other hand. Our reading of Scripture has to be informed by what is going on in our world today—whether we get our news by ipads, phones, TV, or internet—however you hear the news.

One of the biggest fears of the Syrian refugees is that many of them are Muslim, but most folks at EPUC have a wonderful, accepting view of people of other faith communities.

To conclude, I offer words from John Wesley, the founder of Methodism—the denomination of those who grew this EPUC faith community. This meme combines a number of Wesley quotes<sup>v</sup>, but could just as well have been a reflection on James 2:



“Ephphatha, be opened!” May it be so!

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<sup>i</sup> the Greek word is “orthos” which literally means “rightly” or “correctly.”

<sup>ii</sup> Much of this section was shared in a sermon by Anne La Bas, posted on PRCL-L.

<sup>iii</sup> In 2015 I had copies of the poem available for people to pick up at church and take home.

<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, after the service in which I shared a drawing of the dead toddler with this poem, one neighbour of ours told Stephen that she had not appreciated seeing the image of Aylan on the screen after having to endure looking at it in the media for the past several days.

<sup>v</sup> A bit of checking indicated Wesley's extant sermons include none on James 2. The meme above cobbles together various Wesley quotes, the ones on bigotry are in Sermon 38 "A Caution against Bigotry" and some of the prior thoughts are referenced in "John Wesley's Spiritual Christianity" in a chapter on 'Theological Method,' p. 97, with extensive footnotes to Wesley's writings. The quote above gets a LOT right. Not all from one quote but they are Wesley's words on the subject.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=8qqtss5N6cYC&pg=PA97>, accessed on 3 September 2021.