

Proper 18B
September 8, 2024

Pentecost 16
St. Paul's Port Townsend
Creation 2

Proverbs 22.1-2, 8-9, 22-23
Ps 125
James 2.1-17
Mark 7.24-37

Knock knock
Who's there?
Noah
Noah who?
Is there Noah way to open the door?

Knock knock
Who's there?
Venice
Venice who?
Venice this door going to open?



Okay, dumb little jokes with which to open a sermon. But “open” has been on my mind all week and not just from this gospel lesson. There’s a new brewery in Port Angeles called the Mighty Pine – and I shamelessly commend it to you. It’s in a neighborhood on 8th Street, built and brewed by a couple from the Lutheran Church in PA where I am spending a bunch of my time. I was there with a friend Tuesday night and as I left, in the dark, I was struck by a very common neon sign in their window. “OPEN.” Nothing earth-shattering for us. Just “open.” For them, it is pretty earth-shattering as the culmination of three years of hard work and diligent prayer and stumbles through bureaucracy came to fruition just about a month ago.

To be open is more than hours the door is unlocked. If you google “be opened” you get a bunch of things like: this photo or file cannot be opened or the market will not be opened. It’s interesting that those things are negative and “be opened” seems to be associated with “not.”

But Jesus’ use of “be opened” is quite positive. *Ephphatha. Be opened.* The word Mark uses for open is διανοίγω. [dia noy go] It’s also used in the other gospels to open eyes, the womb, the heart, and understanding. The base word, ανοίγω, is also used to open heaven when Jesus was baptized and when the angels ascend and descend on the Son of Man, Mary and Joseph opened treasures from the Magi, knock and it shall be opened unto you, and graves are opened.

Not such a simple little sign in a window anymore. When Jesus opened the ears of the deaf man, there is more to the miracle than having hearing restored. This man is given a restored life and renewed relationship within his own community. No hearing aids or talking books or closed

captioning or even pencil and paper. He couldn't hear in worship, no *Book of Common Prayer*. No reading for any ordinary person and no teaching for this outcast.

What Jesus opened for this man was the chance to break out of his isolation and integrate into family, community, and larger world. He was loved by Jesus into new wholeness, new relationship, new life with his neighbors, himself and God.

So then what was up with Jesus initially refusing to heal the Gentile woman? I think if, in my very strange imagination, James had come before Jesus, he would have said, "Hey buddy. You've got some things to learn about practicing what you preach.... You know, love your neighbor and all that?"

These sharp words from Jesus' words make us uncomfortable; it feels exclusive, closed and not what we understand the mission of Jesus is to be, with love and forgiveness and healing for all. He accuses her of being a dog, a terrible insult, and she fires back: *Well, if I am a dog, then treat me like a dog and give me the crumbs under the table.* It's a "never-the-less she persisted" moment from the ancient near east!

Her plea is heard; her prayer is answered. Jesus himself was opened. Jesus had an order-disorder-reorder moment from last week's sermon in about 3 sentences. It's inspirational for us as well as convicting.

It's a pretty difficult thing for humans to admit that we might be wrong. It would be so helpful in political life to recognize that we have things to learn; that we aren't always the only bearers of righteousness. It would be so helpful in religious life to understand and embrace that "our" way may not be the only way. Contrary to a huge billboard on 101 as you enter Port Angeles that states, "Jesus: your only way to God." It is for us as Christians, but I'm pretty sure we don't have a lock on God's love.

James is up in our business again this week, insisting that partiality to the rich or attractive or elected official is blasphemy. But he's right in holding up a mirror to all of us. If we wish others well but don't supply their needs, what is the good of that?

When the much-maligned phrase of "thoughts and prayers" is used when food deliveries are prevented in war zones, when children and teachers are killed in school, or when a flood wipes out a community, the phrase needs a James and Jesus reboot. Thoughts are good, of course. Some might describe them as prayers. Prayers are essential, of course, and it is what we do as people of God. But as Søren Kierkegaard wrote, prayer does not change God but the nature of the one who prays. Anglican author and theologian CS Lewis similarly wrote: "I pray because I can't help myself. It doesn't change God. It changes me." WE are the ones changed by prayer. When we open ourselves to the Word of God, we allow ourselves to be changed into the people James would have us be: more like Jesus. Being open is a posture as well as an attitude. We see it in people around us; closed postures, closed minds, closed hearts.

If we intend to be open to what the Holy Spirit would ask of us, it is a conscious intention. Jesus got busted by a hungry woman. And his posture of openness and inclusion changed. If he can do it, we can do it.

Ephphatha. Be open to the words in Proverbs today that injustice will reap calamity, that the Lord pleads the cause of the poor, and a good name is better than riches. Be open to James' admonition against favoritism and partiality and that our faith is nothing without works to demonstrate it. These lessons are filled with the proclamation that God's love and favor and blessing are to be extended to all equally and it's not hard to make the case for all our neighbors including creatures and trees and air.

Jesus and James aren't writing to us now; but they are speaking to us now. If they were physically in the world today, I cannot help but believe the command to love your neighbor, be open to the needs of your neighbor, respond generously to the light of God which is in everything around us, then that love must extend to the needs of God's physical world.

In an article this week by author Brian McLaren, he quoted novelist Marilynne Robinson. When asked, "What single thing would make the world in general a better place?" She replied, "Loving it more." The only way there will be anything left of this planet in 1000 years is by loving it more. By being opened to the possibility that our little efforts can and will make a difference.

Doug and I had an experience in Costa Rica this year that we have shared with some of you and perhaps I even preached on it. On an empty beach one evening, with gin & tonics in our salsa jars, we found ourselves in the middle of a Pacific Green Turtle hatch. Tiny babies, at least 100 of them, scurrying to the ocean pulled by some invisible thread. I don't think we could have loved anything more than we did those turtles at that moment.

Think of the starry nights when your breath was stolen by the incomprehensible majesty of it. Recall your wonder at the nature of tides which have been present for millennia and oceans which contain 50-80% of all life on earth. Feel the clutch in your heart when a hummingbird hovers in a fuchsia blossom. Just looking is an act of love. [McLaren]

What if we put some of James' examples on the "lips" of the turtles? "Hey, we know it's rough getting to the ocean because we've added so much light to the night, but just do the best you can; we're rooting for you." Or to those affected by monsoon rains in Pakistan: "That's terrible. I'm sorry it's happening to you. We'll keep you in our prayers. Here's 50 bucks." Or to the 90 remaining critically endangered Vancouver Island marmots, "Sorry about the habitat loss. But we really need the logs in your forests so keep moving, breed well and good luck."

Okay, so these are some harsh examples, but you get the picture. How do we protect them? By loving them more. We love them with a healthy habitat and using the earth's resources with great care, not with abandon. We will not end school violence with thoughts and prayers but with loving more, loving women and children with health care and education and safe housing. We will love our country more by voting for those who most closely align with our values and the teachings of Jesus and James: love your neighbor. Gaze upon the world with love. Because what you love you will try to save. We are all inescapably kin. [McLaren]

Be present in this place. Love where you are. Open your eyes and fall in love with something new. We won't heal the planet on our own. Love in action is the only answer and that happens in community. We're just about to rededicate this beautiful courtyard and labyrinth, celebrating its 20th anniversary, created and loved into being by this community. It will bring back many memories for some and a deeper understanding of the love here in the ground and the walls for others. The labyrinth is not just pavers. It is a path to loving God and neighbor and self more. It is filled with the love of those who came before us and those who are with us still. When you walk the labyrinth next, or sit on the bench meditating on your path to the center of God's love for you, be open at every turn to how to love what you care about more fully.

Some of you are aware that this is my final scheduled Sunday with you. There are a couple more Wednesdays and then Craig+ takes over as your official interim. I hope to be back when he or your next rector are away on a Sunday. In the meantime, I thank you and God for this time we have shared. St. Paul's is an open, loving community of people striving to follow Jesus in heart and action and you're doing it. In a time of discouragement in not having someone permanent with you yet, keep in mind the [edited] words of Steven Charleston: Don't give up. If you think you're out of ideas, if you think the condition of the world is terminal, if anything feels hopeless, don't give up. Love is the answer and love will find you. Love will show you an answer you never imagined. Fall in love with today and be open to a new and possibly unexpected tomorrow. You are in good H/hands.

Knock knock

Who's there?

Orange

Orange who?

Orange you glad your sign says, "Open?"

Gail Wheatley+