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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
16th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

The entertainment headlines this week featured a story about Geoffrey Owens, an actor who used to be on “The Cosby Show” years ago. He was spotted working as a checker at a Trader Joe’s store. Someone took his picture and posted it to social media in such a way that they called it “job shaming”. In other words, working in a grocery store was seen as a fall from the prestige of acting on a popular TV show. In the mind of the person who posted the photo working in a grocery store after having been even a minor celebrity was a sign of failure.

James warns his readers against similar judgements and discrimination in our second reading today. He accuses them of preferential treatment to the rich and similar shaming tactics toward the poor. It’s an even bigger slap in the face when James sets those judgements within the life of the church.

But what may be even harder for us to swallow is what looks to be words of prejudice coming out of Jesus’ mouth in the gospel reading. In his conversation with the Gentile woman, he basically calls her a dog in contrast to the “children”, or those of Jewish descent. It is hard for us to see Jesus in such a human light. We claim in our Nicene Creed that while Jesus is the “only Son of God...true God from true God...of one being with the Father” we also profess that “he came down from heaven...and became truly human”.

In my mind that has always meant that in his humanity Jesus knows what it means to be sad or tired or hurt. He knows the complexities of human relationships. He experienced enough of this human life to be the kind of God to us that we need—a God of compassion and grace as well as a God of power and authority. But maybe Jesus being truly human means something more.

So let’s look at our gospel text through that lens today, the lens of Jesus as truly human. The passage we read this morning begins with an exhausted Jesus. In the first six chapters he has been very busy healing, casting out demons, calming storms, debating with the Pharisees, explaining his teachings to his clueless disciples, and traveling back and forth across and around the Sea of Galilee followed by crowds of people who demand more and more from him.

In this part of chapter 7 Jesus is trying to find a place to retreat, to get some rest, so he goes to Gentile territory. Surely no one there will know who he is or have heard what he has done. Maybe he can just disappear for a while. But that’s not the case. Word of his miracles has traveled this far and a desperate mother seeks him out, not caring how tired he is.

When she begs him to heal her daughter Jesus seems to snap at her. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Ouch! That’s not the kind and compassionate Jesus we know and love. How could he be so rude and condescending—so human?

But this mother will not let him go. In a moment of clarity she responds, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” I would have liked to have seen Jesus’ face after that response.

How long did he pause? Did he look into this woman’s eyes and see her in a new way? Or, with her words were his ears opened to hear how he had put up a barrier between the two of them with his labels of children and dogs?

I’m sure we can think of ways that our words create division that not only separate but place some people above or below others. The divisive nature in our current political climate has both the Left and the Right slinging labels like liberal, conservative, Republican, and Democrat at one another in derogatory and demeaning ways. This name-calling is as vicious among our political leaders, the media, and everyday citizens.

The second part of the gospel reading today can serve as a guiding light for us. After Jesus’ eyes and ears and heart were opened in his encounter with the mother begging for his help, Jesus meets a man who is deaf and cannot speak clearly. Jesus had delivered the woman’s daughter from her demon from afar. But in this second encounter Jesus comes near, so near that he touches the man in the very places where he is closed off from the world and says to him, “Ephphatha! Be opened!”

In Jesus’ encounter with the woman, he came to know the very human experience of the divisions we have been creating among one another since the beginning of time. He understood what it meant to be closed off from those who are not like us or who the world deems as unworthy.

Rather than argue that she was equal to him, she was willing to take whatever morsel of grace Jesus had to offer, trusting that there would be enough power in his mercy to deliver her child from the bondage of her demon. That woman’s faith opened Jesus up, an opening he could then deliver to the next person in need.

I was touched by the response of the actor Geoffrey Owens to the shaming he experienced on social media. In an interview he explained how he came to be a checker at Trader Joe’s. Since *The Cosby Show* he has continued to do some acting and directing and teaching in both of those crafts but found it just wasn’t enough to make ends meet. So he got a job that helped him pay the bills.

After this incident he said, “There is no job that is better than another job. It might pay better, it might have better benefits, it might look better on a resume and on paper. But actually, it’s not better. Every job is worthwhile and valuable, and if we have a rethinking about that because of what has happened to me, that would be great.”

Our jobs do not define our value. Our heritage or ethnicities do not define our value. Our physical or mental or creative abilities, not even our affiliations determine our value as human beings. As sisters and brothers in Christ we know our value as children of God, the one true God who created and loves us and each and every person we meet.

The writer of Mark’s gospel shows us a much more human side to Jesus than, say, the writer of John’s gospel does. Mark shows us a side of Jesus—and thus a side of God—that is responsive to humanity. In this reading, Jesus is opened to a new perspective, a new way of

seeing and hearing and being in relationship. I hope that doesn't diminish the power and majesty and authority of God we so often proclaim. It doesn't for me.

This side of Jesus can show us that through him, God is approachable. We can lay our hopes and expectations before God to move and act and to save us, just as God promises throughout Scripture. And when we approach God with such confidence we can also expect that we will be changed when God is at work in our lives. Jesus helps us see that our eyes or ears or mouth and even our hearts may be closed to the people and the needs around us. If Jesus can be opened in new ways, we can be opened by the power and grace of God, too.

What are the dividing walls in your world? Maybe you know what it's like to be the outsider. Where in the life of the church do we set up divisions, treating some people better than others? Who might you greet today? Someone older? Someone younger? Someone whose story you are curious to know?

If you are one who likes to duck out quickly after worship, we invite you to stick around for even a few more minutes today. Those of you who are the regulars at coffee hour and Adult Forum, invite someone else to join you today. You never know how we will be opened up to share the love and grace we have received from God through the life and love of Jesus Christ.

I invite you to turn to a person near you. Touch them in a way that is comfortable—hand on hand or shoulder—and say to one another, “Ephphatha! Be opened!”

May we all be opened to love and serve our neighbor, in Jesus' name.

Thanks be to God! Amen