

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Y31
16 Pentecost 18B Eucharist 11 a.m.
17
Sunday 9 September 2018

Prov. 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
Psalm 125
Jas. 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-
Mark 7:24-37

The Audacity of Faith, The Destruction of Nature

*"Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened"
(Mk. 7).*

1. Sometimes in an otherwise ordinary moment God just opens us. You may remember the story. I'm visiting Jeannie Taylor on Pacific Avenue. I quickly go out to re-park the car. Rushing back through her apartment door I take a few steps before I feel an odd, unsettling sensation. The furniture and art seem vaguely different. I turn to go upstairs, and there are no stairs.

A total stranger walks down the hallway toward me with a completely puzzled look on her face and her husband just behind her. Suddenly, I experience the flash of recognition. I am in the wrong apartment. Panicking I blurt out the only thing that comes to mind. "I'm the dean of Grace Cathedral!" And somehow I make two fabulous new friends.

The story could have turned out differently. This week a white off duty police officer returned to what she thought was her home. In her confusion she shot an extraordinary and promising twenty-six year old man named Botham Shem Jean in his own apartment. It broke my heart to hear this young man's family talk about his character and personality.¹ Before that moment his life seemed like an incredible gift of hope. And perhaps it would have been if he had not been black. Racial fear and the sheer number of guns in our society insure that tragedies like this will keep recurring.

But imagine a different version of this story. Imagine that my new friend on Pacific Avenue has just worked a twelve-hour shift as a surgeon at UCSF Medical Center and finally has the chance to relax with her husband at their home. Suddenly unannounced at 9:30 p.m. a woman walks into her kitchen to beg her to heal her sick daughter. What would happen?²

Hold this feeling of discomfort, violation and danger in your heart this morning as we step into the world of the Bible.

2. Mark writes the simplest, most immediate, most abrupt gospel we have. He does this to open us up, to shock us into recognizing God. In chapters 5 and 6 Jesus goes through Jewish territory where he heals a suffering woman (5:24-34) saying, "daughter your faith has made you well" (Mk. 5:34) and feeds 5,000 people (Mk. 6:30-52).

Then in chapters 7 (7:24ff) and 8 Jesus ventures out into the world of the gentiles. Tyre and Sidon are not just *foreign* places. This is *hostile* territory.³ The first century Roman Jewish historian Josephus (37-100) calls the Tyrians, "the most inveterate and implacable enemies of the Jewish name and nation."⁴

Mark's truth is simple in theory and terribly demanding in practice. He shows us how God's love transcends all boundaries. It is like a pebble hitting the smooth surface of a lake with energy rippling to the edges. The gifts of healing, love, forgiveness and faith that Jesus brings first to his own people become available to all creation in ever-expanding circles. We are tempted to only care for our own. God constantly invites us to open up to others.⁵

This brings us to a difficult question of interpretation. Jesus does not want anyone to know he is there but he is unable to hide (this word also means forgotten). That has turned out to be so true. Jesus cannot be hidden or forgotten. Uninvited, a Greek (not Gentile) mother from a hostile people bursts into the house asking Jesus to heal her daughter.

Jesus says, "Let the children be fed first, it is not fair to take the children's bread (not food) and throw it to the dogs." With wisdom and audacity she replies, "Lord (not "Sir" as it says in the NRSV), even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus then grants her wish, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter" (Mk. 7).

The question that no preacher seems capable of leaving alone concerns Jesus' mental state. People usually offer one of two interpretations. The first group regards this story as tremendously out of character. Jesus famously tells an approving story about "the Good Samaritan" and seems remarkably open to talking with the Samaritan woman at the well, the Roman Centurion and other foreigners.

So these interpreters can imagine Jesus saying this perhaps with a twinkle in his eye or in a sardonic way. He knows that God's love is for all people and he is allowing the Syro-Phoenician woman to make this important point. When it comes to God there is enough for all.

The second group regards Jesus as blinded by the conventional thinking of his culture and time. The Bible has a long tradition of prophets like Abraham (Gen. 18:16-33) and Moses (Ex. 32:14) arguing with God and even changing God's mind. We cannot imagine a human being who does not evolve and learn. Jesus does this too.

Where do I stand in this perennial debate? Mark is open to both interpretations. We don't know Jesus' tone of voice or details that would make the meaning of this encounter clear. And for that reason, I don't think Jesus' attitude is what this story is principally about.

To me what matters most is that this story offers us a different definition, a biblical definition, of faith. And it is different than the way we use the word in everyday life. The spotlight of the story should be on the woman. For her faith is not defined as certainty (as opposed to doubt). Instead she shows that real faith is audacious. It is courage (rather than irresoluteness).⁶

In short she shatters rules of decorum with a shocking action that even today could get you shot. She is with James who writes, "What good is it... if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you" (Jas. 2)? Faith is living, active and surprising. It always opens us up more – to God and to others.

And that is the greatest challenge of our time, isn't it? If you wanted to sum up the spirit of our age, you would say that we are closed off. We are closed off from each other by politics, media exposure, geography, race, religion, social class, etc. We are so closed off that we are shooting each other. So this morning I ask what are you closed off from? How is God trying to open you up?

Perhaps I am stating the obvious but we as a people are closed off from the natural world. Scholars say we are entering a new geological era called the Anthropocene as human beings alter the environment for every other being on the planet.⁷

In the year I was born Davis, California had 45 days that were 90 degrees Fahrenheit or above. According to the climate model recently published by the New York Times the year my daughter turns 80 there will be 85 days above 90 degrees. According to one estimate it could be ninety degrees or above for 30 percent of the year. In short, Davis will have the climate of Palm Springs.⁸

Again faith is not some magical form of certainty, it is bold action. These enormous oak tree columns, the earth superimposed on our rose window, the images of breaking ocean waves in the north transept, these were created for you – to open you up. What

can you do? You can participate with the governor, lieutenant governor, interfaith leaders in the service of wondering this Wednesday at 4:00 p.m. You can attend the events around the Global Climate Action Summit this week here at the Cathedral. We are going to roll out a carbon-tracking app for you and our whole community. You can volunteer here to do something about this.

In this year of truth we invited the neuroscientist and primatologist Robert Sapolsky to be our St. Francis Day Forum guest and preacher. In his memoir he describes his childhood dream of joining the gorillas in a diorama at the New York Natural History museum. Instead he ended up joining a baboon troop as a researcher in East Africa at age 21. He gave them Old Testament names, he noted their every social connection. When the time came he even risked his life to save one who he had accidentally endangered.

At the end of his book he describes how unscrupulous neighbors began selling meat tainted with tuberculosis to a nearby tourist resort. He saw that the baboons foraging in their trash were dying. He tried nearly everything he could to stop them, but ultimately he failed.

He writes that as a young man, "I had an infinity of love to expend on a troop of baboons."⁹ Sapolsky does not believe in God, but he sees that these beings deserve his prayers. He writes, "I still have not found a Prayer for the Dead for the baboons... In a world filled with so many words of lamentation, no words have come to me." Something opened his heart to those beings. With the Syro-Phoenician woman he shares an audacious generosity in reaching beyond the boundaries that most others accept.

Ultimately, though I do believe in God and this changes everything. In 1935 after the death of his nine year old son the composer Herbert Howells wrote the music for a hymn that describes my experience in the face of hopelessness and grief.

It is Hymn 665 and it goes like this, "All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew, me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true, God unknown, he alone calls my heart to be his own."

We are still in the world of the Bible. Jesus cannot be hidden or forgotten. His energy continues to ripple through the universe. We are not working on this alone. We also have others. And sometimes in an otherwise ordinary moment God just opens us.

¹ Matthew Haag, "Dallas Police Officer Kills Her Neighbor in His Apartment, Saying She Mistook It for Her Own," The New York Times, 7 September 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/07/us/dallas-police-shooting-botham-shem-jean.html?action=click&module=In%20Other%20News&pgtype=Homepage&action=click&module=Late%20Story&pgtype=Homepage>

² To complicate things imagine that the doctor and her husband grew up in Vietnam and the woman is from a white California family. What would you expect the doctor to say?

³ This section and the material including the two interpretations of Jesus and so much else in here comes from Liz and Matt Boulton's SALT Commentary for 16 Pentecost, 4 September 2018.

<http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/9/4/be-opened-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-sixteenth-week-after-pentecost>

⁴ *The Complete Works of Flavius Josephus*, Chapter 9, tr. George Henry Maynard. "The royal Psalmist reckons the Tyrians among the most inveterate and implacable enemies of the Jewish name and nation."

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;cc=evans;rgn=div3;view=text;idno=N18799.0001.001;node=N18799.0001.001%3A99.1.9>

⁵ The American Puritan Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) wrote a book called *The Nature of True Virtue*. Ultimately human beings can only be good in what he calls private systems. We are good and someone within our group is obligated to look after us. God alone is capable of true virtue, of real disinterested love that is not bounded by personal identity.

⁶ Again, grateful for this insight to Liz and Matt Boulton's SALT Commentary for 16 Pentecost, 4 September 2018.

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropocene>

⁸ I calculated the 30% by taking the highest number of days in the range as the basis for my estimate. Nadja Popovich, Blacki Migliozi, Rumsey Taylor, Josh Williams and Derek Watkins, "How Much Hotter Is Your Hometown Than When You Were Born?" *The New York Times*, 30 August 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/30/climate/how-much-hotter-is-your-hometown.html>

⁹ Robert Sapolsky, *A Primate's Memoir: A Neuroscientist's Unconventional Life Among the Baboons* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001) 303, 301.