

Draw the Circle Wider

Mark 7:24-37

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Ephaphtha! Be Opened! Ephaphtha!

This is Aramaic, Jesus' vernacular. When a deaf and mute man is brought to Rabbi Jesus, Pastor Jesus takes him aside. And Doctor Jesus sticks his fingers in the man's ears and spits on the ground. Truth be told, it was not some puny palace-raised domesticated spitting but a good hearty blue collar carpenter spit. SPIT!

Then the Son of God touched the man's tongue. I'll tell you what's going on: he is jimmying open this deaf mute's insulated world. Ephaphtha! Open!

Jesus sighs, looks up to heaven. Hey! Pay attention! Something is going on here! Jesus is pushing against the physical and social walls that encase this man, isolating him from participating. He can't hear. He can't speak. Ephaphtha! Open!

Hey! Pay attention! Something is going on here! Jesus is smashing the stained glass ceiling of religiosity that would call such a deaf-mute human unclean: cursed, unloved, punished by God. Ephaphtha! Open!

Behold! The deaf mute man's hearing and speech are restored! He listens and he hears. Pray tell, what is it that he hears? Hears the birds singing! Hears the children laughing playing catch! He hears!

Tell you what: he hears the sound of gunfire in Chicago. He hears Shane Colombo's mother weeping, her 25-year-old son, PhD Student at Northwestern, shot dead, next door in Rogers Park.

He hears 19-year-old Delmonte Johnson's mother wailing, drive-by shooting on the South Side.

Hears 17-year-old Laquan McDonald's mother, who has been crying since October 2014.

Ephaphtha! Open! Ears open. Tongue loosened. With loosened tongue this man can now add to voices crying out for justice. Loosened tongues!

This past week, Bishop Sally Dyck sent out a pastoral letter to Chicago churches, asking that we pray for the city of Chicago. As one pastor put it, "We can't stand it anymore. Now is not the time to point fingers. We must save our children." (ABC News, Tuesday, August 07, 2018)

Some argue that it's best not to hear or have tongues loosened. So left to itself, using the metaphor, a deaf-mute community might want to remain safely deaf and cozily mute. But look! "They"

bring the man to Jesus! Ephaphtha! Open! Deaf man hears. Mute man speaks.

Surely for me as I read this story it's plain as can be that First Church is the Ephaphtha community. Ephaphtha! Open! We of Open Doors! Ephaphtha! Open! We of Open Hearts! Ephaphtha! Open! We of Open Minds! So whoever you are, you are indeed welcome, accepted, and embraced in this place.

According to (our Director of Membership) Mary Taylor-Johnson's records, First Church was so Open in the months of July and August we welcomed 232 Sunday morning visitors. And Mary tells me, "FYI, that is only counting local adults we can identify by first and last names."

Wow wow wow! Guests are a blessing. More greeters needed. More ushers needed. More Welcome Spot hosts needed. All hands on deck!

If you're new: worship is at 10:30 a.m. on Sundays; Sunday school for all ages is on Sundays at 9:15 a.m., lots of different classes for you to peruse. Fellowship and service opportunities are throughout the week. And today's lunch is for all.

And for those looking for a church family, let's cut to the chase: You found it! This is it!

I am grateful for those who have toiled in the planting, watering, and nurturing of this community of faith. Fact is, nothing amazing just happens. Your work has not been in vain. This morning I name 98-year-old Beth Foster, whose life we celebrated yesterday and laid her ashes to rest in the memorial garden. Beth was a member at First Church for 67 years, and bookkeeper at First Church for 35 years.

If you ask me, our greatest challenge at First Church is to keep growing at the edges. You see, it's easy to get comfortable in our historical niche in the Evanston story. After all, there is a big rock outside Evanston's Public Library that marks the location of our first church building and calls us "The first house of worship in Evanston." After all, Evanston is named after Mr. Evans, who was a member of ours. We are hand and glove with Garret-Evangelical Seminary. And Northwestern's first president, Clark Hinman was, one of ours! Whether we like it or not, we are Evanston's DNA. Evanston is us and we are Evanston.

Let us model then how to live in this new world. Daring to explore new ideas. Learning from our mistakes. Drawing the circle wider.

And look! Jesus models for us how to draw the circle wider In our text this morning. Jesus travels as far north as he ever travels in the gospel. One scholar points out that Jesus crosses the border and is not only well outside Palestinian Jewish society but in the historic center of the Phoenician naval empire, a legendary adversary of Israel, though now part of the Roman province of Syria. The physical body of the historical Jesus is out of his comfort zone. With his body Jesus draws a wider physical circle. Out of his comfort zone, the gospel of Mark safely stashes Jesus away in the house. "The house" -- read that as "the church"!

But listen! Even being in the house will not keep Jesus safe from a desperate mother of a sick child. Seek him Mamma! Seek him!

She enters the house. Gender: female. Race: Syrophenician. Ethnicity: gentile. Status: mother. Scratch that: mother of a sick child. She is a fearless lioness.

In that encounter with "The Other," Jesus quotes to her a proverb from his hometown. Yes! Jesus quotes the margins of the social construct he was born into. It is a crude and harsh proverb because at the margins that separate into Us and Them are harsh and crude words. This mother of a sick child, she probably has heard that quote before. But she is on a mission. Eyes on her sick child, she will suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous prejudice and find a way to turn the proverb on its head for the sake of her sick daughter.

Jesus basically tells her, I can't help you. I help only people from my tribe. I am doctor only to people like me. But she will not be turned away or even offended. "I'll take crumbs under the table," she tells him. In other words, You won't open the soup kitchen? Okay, I'll dig into your trash looking for a meal. Holding a cardboard sign up, I'll say thank you for your change. I'll thank you for your quarter.

Friends, I don't know whether she embarrassed Jesus, Son of God. But this we know: she changed him. She jimmed open his social and religious restrictions. She forced him to draw a circle so wide that his healing power stretched all the way to her off-site daughter lying in her private women-space in her Syrophenician home.

Listen up! She was his Ephaphtha! She was his Open! Jesus redrawing his circle.

This re-drawing the circle including those who had been previously excluded happens over and over again in the Godstory that is the Bible. One writer puts it this way: the bible is clear. Moabites are bad. They are not to be allowed to dwell among God's people (Deuteronomy 23.3). But then comes the story of Ruth the Moabite, which draws the circle wider to include the Moabites.

The bible is clear. No foreigners or eunuchs are allowed (Deuteronomy 23). But then comes the story of an African eunuch baptized, which draws the circle wider to include eunuchs.

The bible is clear. Samaritans are unclean and hated. Then Jesus tells a story of the Good Samaritan and the circle is drawn wider to include Samaritans.

You see, the story may begin with prejudice and discrimination and animosity, but the Spirit is on the move, moving God's people toward openness, welcome, inclusion, acceptance, and affirmation.

Draw the circle wide this morning. The drawing of the circle wide is to be found in the music! Thank you, Brian! That first piece, Installation Prelude, is a piece commissioned for the installation of the rector of a church in East Barnett, London, an ecumenical church where Methodists and Anglicans are in partnership. When I saw "East Barnett" it sort of rang a bell, having lived in England a long time ago. So I sent out a text to my husband David. "Does East Barnett mean anything to you?" And typically David, he replied, "Why?" So I explained about the Installation piece written for a rector in East

Barnett, and he replied, "East Barnett is my birthplace." Of course! That is where his Welsh father and his Danish mother found some "digs" and had their first child. True to form, I found that East Barnett church's email and sent them word on Friday. Imagine my joy this morning when I got an email telling me they had prayed for us in their worship service!

Draw the circle wider still. The final piece today, the postlude for which I hope you will remain seated, is a toccata by Florence Price, whose family left Little Rock and found refuge in Chicago. Florence, the first female African American symphonist. Whodathunk the organ could sound so jazzy and make us smile.

The variety of music this morning draws the circle wide. Draws it wider still.

So Mark chapter 7 could be easily summarized with the 1945 words of a young black female lawyer who years later went on to be the first African American Episcopalian priest. She wrote, "I intend to destroy segregation by positive and embracing methods. When my brothers try to draw a circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them. Where they speak out for the privilege of a puny group, I shall shout for the rights of humankind." (Pauli Murray. An American Credo. Common Ground)

What about your circle? Ephaphtha! Open!

Amen.