

Sermon, *Ephphatha – The Power of Being Open to God's Message*
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 9.8.24

I'm going to attempt to do three things in today's message. I think it's a bit foolish, to be honest, but there is so much in this that I want to share with you (and you all are doing such a great job at absorbing the message each week) I am going to give this a shot. I'm going to talk about three things:

- 1) ephphatha (*ehf-fa-tha*),
- 2) faith and works as outlined by the Letter of James, and
- 3) regret.

Ephphatha – if you don't know what this means, you are not alone. It's an Aramaic word transliterated into Mark's Gospel. (Back in those days, Jesus spoke Aramaic, yet the New Testament writers wrote in Greek) But let's rewind just a bit. The beginning of Mark's Gospel quotes Jesus saying: *Metanoia*, the Kingdom of God is here! I've been talking to you about metanoia – it's a Greek word, meta for beyond and noia for thinking. The idea is that Jesus is asking, commanding, us to think above and beyond ourselves because the Kingdom of God is here. Or, another way to look at it, using Greek philosophy, is that the way to see and participate in the Kingdom is to metanoia – to think beyond. Some would say this: The Kingdom of God is going to blow your mind! And yes, that's probably closer to what it says that I am willing to admit. But, the point here is Jesus wants us to open our minds, to think above our normal thought processes, to see and participate in the Kingdom.

Now eight chapters into Mark's Gospel (and nearing the end), Mark introduces another word that Jesus said – ephphatha. Mark then writes, "that is, 'Be opened.'" He had to tell his audience what the word meant (which tells me they didn't know Aramaic). Mark could have written this: Jesus said, "Be opened." But instead, he drops in the Aramaic word (transliterated, of course, in Greek). Why? No one really knows for sure, but my thought is that it is related to metanoia. There must be an Aramaic meaning that does not exist in Greek. And, it takes beyond-thinking to grasp it. Jesus said ephphatha to a man born deaf, and one who could not speak. He was "opened" and now he can hear and speak. The allegory here is that those who witnessed it, and those who later read about it, are also called to be open. When we do that, we are opening ourselves to the power of God's message. Once we "hear" the message, we then find our tongue is free to share the power of his love and forgiveness.

Another way to look at this is we were first called in Mark's Gospel to think beyond; and now, we are called to more than think beyond, we are to be open(ed) to God's message.

Speaking of being open to God's message, let's talk a little about the Letter of James because we will be reading from James's letter for three more weeks. I'd like you to get to know him a little better and be open to his message. There are books written about who James is – many of them believe he is Jesus's brother (as in, he is a child born of Mary and Joseph). And yet, there are others saying he is not. I believe he is Jesus' brother, born of Mary and Joseph, and, from what I have read, he did not believe Jesus was the messiah until the Resurrected Jesus met with him individually. St. Paul wrote briefly about that encounter in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:6). Church history teaches that James was the first "overseer" (episcopos) of Jerusalem. He

was martyred in the year 62. It is reasonable to believe Jesus was crucified and resurrected in the year 32. Thirty years later, James died for his belief in Christ Jesus. Rome did not like to martyr old men and women. They believed it gave the empire a bad look (which it did). Nevertheless, James was martyred when he would have been considered a senior citizen. This means Rome was trying to make a point even if it made them look bad.

The Bishop of Rome was a dangerous position and, frankly, it still is. I met the retired Jerusalem bishop in San Diego. He amazed us with stories about the danger of that position – historically and with his own life.

Back to James, he was Jewish, from a strong Jewish household, and many believe he thought this – believing in the Christ Jesus – was a Jewish movement. It's not that he didn't care about the gentiles; his focus was on his own religious tradition and background. He most likely wrote this letter in 45 (to 48). It was prior to the council that met in Jerusalem with Paul, Peter and all the rest when they decided that this was a movement for all people and not just those born of the Jewish faith. I mention all this because I'd like to focus on what James wrote about faith.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 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? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Can faith save you? The general Christian response to that question is yes. Yet, James is begging the question and answers it as "no" faith alone cannot save you. This might sound shocking; but, let's take a look at his religious background. When he wrote "faith" (sozo in Greek), it would be better translated as "creed". We understand faith to be something we believe in even if we cannot see it. Faith to him was list of things, like a creed, that one thinks. For instance, *We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.* It's a true statement; but, by itself, does it save? So I'd have to agree with James, a creed is a statement of faith, but, it is not faith itself. The creed must do something, it must have some sort of "works". In James' religious view, "works" are a combination of God's revealed law and our own moral actions as a result. For example, *I am the Lord your God, you will have no other God's but me, you will use my name correctly, you will not murder, you will not steal or cheat.* That is God's revealed law (in the 10 commandments) which will direct our moral actions. It is said that happy is the one who follows God's commandments. And, in James's time (and our own), the one who believes in God, uses God's name correctly, who honors their father and their mother, who does not murder, or steal or cheat (and so on), that person is "happier" than the one who violates those laws. For James, the "works" are living a moral and ethical life following God's commandments. So yes, faith (creeds) by itself, without works, is dead. The ephphatha – be opened – about this is that we need to be open to following not just the words that we say in church but living an ethical and just life following God. We are to be opened to helping those in need, to show mercy, not judgement, to forgive as we have been forgiven and to love as we are loved.

And now, let's talk about regret and see if I call pull all this together. Here comes the heavy lifting. The discussion groups this past week talked about an article in the NY Times about living

with regret. The author regretted his decision to have his daughter Olivia. In our discussion about regret, someone said the following: Regret is a flashlight that illuminates our future so that we can avoid making the same mistake twice. Yes, it is worth it to read that again, *regret is a flashlight that illuminates our future so that we can avoid making the same mistake twice.*

Today's Gospel lesson started with the Syrophenician gentile woman who had a sick child; she begged Jesus to heal her, Jesus said: *Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.* (In other words, no.)

She replied: Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

Jesus responded (with a smile, I believe): For saying that, you may go, your daughter has been healed.

Those are harsh words of Jesus – let the children be fed first because it is not fair to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs. But he said it and I believe the woman was immediately racked with guilt. You see, Syrophenician gentiles believed that people were poor because they did something wrong or they deserved it. I can imagine this woman saying to someone else: why would I feed the poor with food that can be fed to the (non-poor) children. Some authors believe that the Syrophenician mindset was that it was wrong to help the poor, otherwise, how would they learn to not be poor. (I think that thought is still with us from time to time) In Mark's writing of this story, there appears to be no pause between the dialogue between Jesus and this unnamed gentile woman. But, if I can be opened to it, I wonder if there was a protracted amount of time. Did he say this to her, she went away with regret and then used her regret as a flashlight to illuminate her future and not make the same mistake twice. She then returned to Jesus and said, "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." In other words, let me be like the dog and eat the crumbs. She used her regret as a way of humility; and, it saved her daughter. She became ephphatha to God's message of humility and unity of all people. It took some metanoia but she got it. And, when she did, her daughter was released from it.

(The "it" is the possession of a demon according to Mark. If you always read this passage as a demonic possession that Jesus then released, I'm going to suggest that you be ephphatha to the reading that the possession of the daughter was the incorrect belief about not helping the poor. It was a releasing of a negative family system belief about others and a humbling of oneself – we are all dependent upon God the way a dog is dependent upon its master. And, if you have always read this passage that way, I'm going to suggest that you be ephphatha to the literal reading that the daughter was possessed by the evil one and that Jesus released her because of the faith of her mother.)

The Syrophenician woman was opened to the creed she had assembled about those less fortunate than herself. Her works were to ask for mercy and to reject judging others based on how they are dependent on others (because we're all dependent on each other and God). In our modern world of medical science, we are witnessing people who were born deaf to restore their hearing (and speaking). But, what is truly remarkable in our time, is to see someone be ephphatha to God's message of love, mercy and forgiveness, and to do the works of that message. According to Mark and James, it was also truly remarkable in their time to see someone ephphatha to God's message.

One last thing about regret: when my wife and I decided to adopt our girls overseas, we read as much as we could and met with people who had done the same thing. One theme that came up was that each couple, at one point, regretted their decision to adopt. For some it happened three weeks in, others it was three years, but they all regretted it. This was obviously troubling to us. We asked what we could do to prevent it. The answer: nothing. But, each couple told us that when the regret does come up to 1) recognize it and not feel guilty about it and 2) remember why you decided to adopt in the first place. Once the couple remembered, and spoke out loud the reasons why they wanted to adopt, the regret faded away. What remained was resilience. It was a reminder of their moral actions that got them to where they are. And, that whatever unpleasant circumstance they were in, it was only temporary. It was an ephphatha moment – an opening (or reopening) of their hearts for the purpose of the adoption. That moment also became a flashlight for them to view their future.

The message *to be open* was vitally important in the first century as the movement of Jesus Christ was growing. And it is important today for us to remember to be open to the power of God's message in our lives.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.