

Be Open: The Progressive, Positive, & Practical Message of Jesus

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Mark 7.32-35

Mark chapter 7 is actually divided into three sections. In the first section, those who are concerned with protecting the fundamentals of their religion complain to Jesus that his disciples aren't keeping all the rules. In fact, they are ignoring biblical mandates and Jesus isn't all that worked up about it.

Then, in the second section, a woman from Phoenicia approaches Jesus asking for help for her daughter who is either physically or mentally ill. In any case, the exact cause of the illness is not known, so it is attributed to malevolent forces. She says, "my daughter has a demon." Now, Phoenicia is part of the Canaanite culture, and in the book of Deuteronomy, Canaanites are labeled as enemies who are to be utterly destroyed. So, with this bit of biblically justified ethnic prejudice in mind, Jesus basically calls the woman and her people dogs and suggests he doesn't really have a lot of time for dogs. But the woman challenges him and says, "If I were a dog, you'd treat me better than this." And Jesus repents, that is, he has a change of heart, and says, "the demon has left your daughter."

When the religious zealots wanted to quote scripture at Jesus to condemn his friends, he wasn't having it! But then, he realizes there are times when he had allowed that sort of biblical proof-texting to cause him to be less than kind to people he didn't understand. Jesus is healed of his prejudice in his encounter with the Phoenician woman, and hopefully the hearers of the story were healed of some of their prejudices as well. You see, even when you quote the bible accurately to condemn, belittle, exclude, or vilify someone else, you have misusing it and you have missed the mark. Jesus shows us that in a dramatic way with the Phoenician woman.

Finally, the third part of Mark chapter 7 is the part we heard read today. Someone else is brought to Jesus for healing. This person can't hear or speak well. And Jesus ministers to him in some rather nauseating ways. And then he said, "Be opened." And the one person can suddenly heal perfectly and speak plainly.

The theme leading into this pericope has been opening our hearts. And because that is the set up for this story, I believe that theme is continued in this story. Today's gospel reading isn't about primitive healing magic where saliva is medicinal and sticking fingers in a stranger's ears is therapeutic. In fact, about 15 years later when Matthew tells the story, he leaves out the disgusting details of fingers in ears and mouth to mouth spittle. The story, perhaps one Mark has heard or one he has created out of whole cloth, I think is meant to be as disruptive, as challenging, as uncomfortable as the two preceding stories would have been to Mark's original audience.

Scripture is very clear about dietary and cleanliness rules. Jesus won't be tyrannized by the rules. He can think for himself.

Scripture is very clear about the Canaanites – those people, those enemies of ours...people who worship differently, who speak a different language, who live in another place, who in the past have behaved in ways that we found offensive...and yet, when confronted by one face to face, Jesus doesn't see scripturally justified prejudice, he sees a human being that deserves respect and compassion and goodwill.

Challenging long held interpretations of scripture is bound to make some people uncomfortable. Is like you're sticking your finger in the sacred message and spitting on the holy traditions...or so some might conclude. But Jesus says, "be open."

Open your hearts.

Open your minds.

Broaden your perspective. That's when miracles occur...when you can see what you could not see before; when you make room for what you had failed to make room for before. When you can see God in whoever you judged to be your enemy, or when you can see the dignity in someone you had dismissed as unworthy, unlovable, or unsavory, then you have experienced more of God than you had previously allowed yourself to, and that is always life changing...that is a miracle.

The story isn't about a hearing impaired man...the story is about religious people who can see the sacred value of all people, who can't hear God's voice singing in every heart, who can't speak words of affirmation for all of God's children. Having our prejudices confronted might make us feel uncomfortable, but if we will be open to God's radically inclusive love, then we will experience a healing of the soul we might not even have known we needed.

Progressive Christianity is an open approach to faithful living. It values honest questions more than pre-approved answers. It seeks truth not only from religion and philosophy but also from the social and hard sciences and from personal experience. It knows that truth can never be fully known, but the search for truth can be invigorating and wondrous. It seeks to liberate faith from the assumptions of the first century so that it can be relevant in the 21st century. It seeks to have an open door that invites people in as they are without telling them what they must believe in order to be acceptable to God. The progressive, or open view, is that God is love and divine love could never exclude any person for any reason. Learning to trust divine love and to love ourselves and others is the spiritual path. The rest is just the game we choose to play.

The Center for Progressive Christianity shares a story that represents the heart of Progressive, or Open Christianity. A Sunday school teacher was telling her class of 9 years olds a bible story, and being clever and curious, and a little precocious, some of the children expressed skepticism that the story could have actually happened just the way it was being told. Rather than argue with the children, the wise teacher instead told the story of *Charlotte's Web*...a story about a pig named Wilbur and his close friend, a spider named Charlotte. After telling the story, she said, "Now, we know that pigs and spiders don't really talk, don't we? One little girl shouted, "It's a story hello?!" So the teacher asked, "Do you think the story is true?" And a little boy said, "well, it's kind of true." And the class agreed, that even though the characters were fictional and that animals don't use human language, the story was all the same in some way true. And the teacher said, "Fine then. Let's look at the bible in the same way."

Isn't that what Mark's Jesus is telling us today? Yes, maybe the bible seems to say that you should ignore or hate or condemn that person, but maybe there is another way to understand the bible? Maybe it can be true without literalizing every detail of the story? Maybe that's exactly what he means when he says, "Be open!" Be open to new understandings, new ideas, new thoughts, new experiences, new ways of embracing divine Love which embraces all people.

Ernest Holmes, who knew Norman Vincent Peale and apparently had some influence on him, was the founder of the philosophy called Science of Mind. Holmes called his positive philosophy "open at the top." He meant that truth could not be limited to a single religion. New insights could be discovered, he insisted, by looking at several religions, and science, and personal exploration. Religion shouldn't be closed...it should be open at the top...open to new insights, new ways of experiencing the abundance of divine grace.

There is a children's rhyme that teaches this same lesson: *Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put humpty together again.* Well, I'm not surprised! Horse hooves are notoriously ill-equipped for repairing delicate objects! But really, isn't the story telling us that once an egg is broken open, it can't ever be put back. It can't be closed up again! Once a mind is opened, it can't go back to its previously restricted state. We can't pretend to not be stretched open by new learning, new thoughts, new experiences, the constant renewal of life. Be opened! And you'll never be the same again.

Be Open! That is the progressive, positive, and practical message of Jesus. And this is the good news. Amen.

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***I am open to the blessings of Life.
I am open to the power of Love.
I am open to the guidance of Wisdom.
I am open to my amazing potential.
I'm open to God and all is well.
Amen.***

“Keep your mind open and free to receive that lesson which fits your own disposition best.” Emma Curtis Hopkins