

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

When God Opens Our Hearts, We Open Our Doors

Mark 7: 24-37
James 2: 1-10

Rev. Dr. Galen E. Russell III
September 6, 2009

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Prayer: Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord, open the eyes of our hearts... we want to see you! Amen.

I'm only guessing here, but I think that there are liberals among us! [gasp!] And, I think there are conservatives among us, too! [more dismay!] Democrats, you're here! And, Republicans as well! Oh my God, what is this church coming to? And, I'm only guessing here, but I think a few of you, if you had the chance, would you stand up and say, "I take the Bible literally..." and a few more of you would stand up and say, "I take it interpretively." Most of you, however, would probably look at me cross-eyed and say, "I'm not standing up and declaring anything! And, what business do you have, Pastor Galen, in asking that?" Truth is, I wouldn't do that, nor do I have any business doing that.

But, I might ask you to raise your hand or stand up if you are a Christian! [raise hand] But, wait... I can be a liberal Christian, or a conservative Christian...I can be a Christian who is a Republican... or a Christian who is a Democrat... a Christian who

takes the Bible literally... or one who takes the Bible interpretively. Oh my God, what is this church coming to?

You see, being Christian is NOT about being liberal or conservative, a part of any particular political party, or right or left on the theological or biblical spectrum... It's about, as Jim Wallis has said, going deep in the spectrum. Being a Christian is about deeply loving God, neighbor, and self. I said it last week, and I hammer away at it again this week and James' letter reiterates—You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

If we have that law as the foundation of what it means to be a Christian, then that means simultaneously, we deliberately, consciously, and determinedly do not let ourselves be blinded by our liberalism, or our conservatism, our political agendas, or our theological understandings, our biblical stances, or our cultural boundaries. All of these can prejudice us, cloud our minds, distort our thoughts.

Jesus was able to not be blinded by any of these. In fact, he was able to look beyond the political, theological, cultural, religious and biblical constraints when he was with this Syrophoenician woman. The woman had at least four strikes against her: 1) she was a woman in a culture where women were in a lesser class than men. 2) she was an interruption to Jesus as he was looking for some down time. 3) she was a Gentile (a non-Jew who was considered a foreigner. And 4) she had a demon-possessed daughter! None of these characteristics would win her any "acceptance contests." But, Jesus sees

her faith, has compassion on her, and after a curious verbal exchange, the woman's daughter was healed long distance (a good indication, by the way, that Jesus WAS in the health care business!)

I think, that verbal exchange between Jesus and the woman revealed two profound truths, not so much about the woman, even not so much about Jesus, but about the nature of God and what God offers humanity. God's generous nature is revealed, and God generously offers food for the heart, food for the human spirit... food for healing... food for the world. The nature of God's food is that whatever it is a little or a lot, large pieces or crumbs, all of it is nourishing for all God's children, regardless of background, or cultural boundaries, or anything.

I think God opened Jesus' heart to see beyond those four strikes against the woman. Cultural boundaries, political boundaries, physical, emotional, religious boundaries... none of these stop God's gift from nourishing one in need.

Preaching instructor Fred Craddock tells the story of a missionary sent to preach the gospel in India. After many months the time came for a furlough back home. His church wired him the money to for a ticket on board ship, but when he got to the port city, he discovered a boatload of Jews had just been allowed to land temporarily. It happened to be Christmas morning so, this missionary went to one of the attics of a house where several Jews were staying. He walked in and said, "Merry Christmas." The people looked at him as if he were crazy and responded, "We're Jews." "I know

that,” said the missionary, “What would you like for Christmas?” In utter amazement the Jews responded, “Why, we’d like pastries, good pastries like the ones we used to have in Germany.” So the missionary went out and used the money for his ticket home to buy pastries for as many Jews as was possible. Of course, then he had to wire home asking for more money to book his passage back to the States. Not surprisingly, his superiors wired back, asking what happened to the money they had already sent. He wired that he had used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews. His superiors wired back, “Why did you do that? They don’t even believe in Jesus.” He wired back: “Yes, but I do.”

[http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?](http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=93000161)

[installment_id=93000161](http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=93000161), retrieved September 5, 2009). That missionary’s heart was opened by God. God is incredibly generous—there is no discrimination with God when it comes to food for the children of God.

We are recipients of the same food from God, and as such, our hearts are opened by God, too. Does this mean the same kind of non-discrimination is to be a part of our mentality, too? Does it mean that no matter what the issue is, we are to make efforts to look beyond our humanly created boundaries? Beyond our politics? Beyond our religious agendas? Beyond our understandings?

When God opens our hearts, I think we are to open our doors! Instead of boundaries of human construction, instead of humanly-made distinctions, might we be more akin to God’s ways by loving our neighbors as ourselves? And we know that our neighbors are

everyone in this world, right? Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that! So, might we be more in tune with God if we are hospitable to all by opening our doors?

When I say "we open our doors," I don't mean just the physical doors of our building. I don't mean just living up to the saying in the front of our worship bulletin, "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." Everyone IS welcome here, and we do a great job with that! I mean all that and more.

I mean that whatever doors are closed to loving our neighbors, those doors need to be opened. I mean that if there are cultural, political issues like health care reform, or education reform, or issues about who can marry and who can't, or issues about for economic growth, issues about torture, or what to do with prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison, no matter what...choose the side or the approach that most closely matches loving neighbors as ourselves. Each and every issue facing our country in these complex times, I believe, needs to be answered and addressed through the lens of loving our neighbors as ourselves. I know it's difficult to do that... but that is what it means to be deep into Christianity. When God opens our hearts, I believe we open real and figurative doors to hospitality—all kinds, to loving outside our comfort zones!

For most of her life, Dorothy Day kept saying things aren't the way they should be, and that it would be a far less cruel world if those who go to church cared for the poor half as well as they take care of their Bibles! For six years Dorothy looked for a way to connect her social conscience with her religious conversion, a search that gave birth to

the Catholic Worker movement in May 1933. Originally it was just a newspaper, but within weeks of the papers' publication, the first house of hospitality—her apartment—came into being simply because Dorothy couldn't turn away a homeless woman who had seen the paper and came asking for help. Today there are nearly 175 Catholic Worker houses of hospitality, not to mention the many more places of welcome that wouldn't exist had it not been for Dorothy Day's struggle to live the gospel and open her doors (Jim Forest, An Inspired Complainer, *Sojourners*, November-December 1997, 13. http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=hospitality, retrieved September 5, 2009).

Hasn't God touched your heart in some way, shape, or form? Hasn't God in Christ enabled you to go deep in your faith? If so, open your doors. Wherever the door is closed, whatever door is closed, strive to open that door, strive to love neighbor as yourself. So that, to use a common phrase, 'at the end of the day,' God might look upon us and say, "I see what this church is coming to, and I am pleased!"

May it be so. May God help us. Amen.