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18B Crossing boundaries: Syrophenician woman, deaf Gentile, and Parable of the Prejudiced Ushers,
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Ephphatha **EHF-uh-thuh**. Ephphatha **EHF-uh-thuh**. I have been repeating this Aramaic word Jesus speaks to open the ears of the deaf Gentile man all week. If you participate in Centering Prayer, this would be a great sacred Word. It means, be open, listen, hear, speak your own truth. This is also a theme running through our lectionary readings today. In James we have the parable of the prejudiced usher and the rich man and the poor man. In Mark Jesus heals the daughter of a Syrophenician woman as well as the deaf Gentile. The stories are all about crossing boundaries.

Jesus is tired, exhausted, and longs for a beach vacation where no one knows him so he can re-center and stay connected to his Father. He goes across the border to Gentile country to Sidon and Tyre, in today's Lebanon. One of my dearest fellow residents in training, George El-Koury, grew up in Sidon with its palm trees, blue waters, where he went to a Presbyterian mission elementary and high school. Tyre is 30 miles south where he often visited. He and his family fled Lebanon many years ago when it became unsafe for them to live there. Do not forget that there are Christians in these Middle Eastern countries where boundaries have become so important.

We often stumble on Jesus' seemingly harsh "Charity begins at home" response to the Canaanite woman as she is described in Matthew's gospel when she begs Jesus to heal her daughter. We forget that Jesus is human and divine. Most of the time we think that Jesus walks around wondering what the disciples will think if he explains that the earth really revolves around the sun or how a microwave will work, but in the Bible, Jesus struggles to learn what is true. He grows in wisdom and is tempted as we are. Women often help Jesus extend his compassion to people he has been told to hate. Remember he grows up in a world where he is prohibited from speaking to women, is prejudiced against children, is taught prayers saying, "thank you I am not a Gentile or I am not a woman." These are his uncles', his father's, his grandfather's prayers.

It may be possible that you and I have also been taught to hate or disregard or avoid other groups of people, Muslims, Iraqis, Blacks, southern Baptists, gays, people with wrong politics, Democrats, Republicans.¹ /

The Syrophenician woman is our role model of how to speak to someone with a different belief system and share our spirituality. She does not contradict Jesus or put down or attempt to change his theology, but broadens it. She actually admits to being a dog! She agrees with him, but then redefines who can get food, even the dogs under the table.² She changes Jesus' mind by the depth of her love for her child, not by arguing from a legal or ethical point of equality. Deb Cooper, our deacon in training knows more about this. She formed a group of Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian women who meet regularly, study and have dinner together. Some of our teens also participate in a similar youth group. They are teaching us as Jesus did/ that we can end prejudice by personal one-on-one contacts, looking across the table face-to-face to a person, knowing they are a person not a category,/ one person, one

meal, at a time.^{2,3} Some years ago we saw this happen in Northern Ireland. Crossing borders, crossing boundaries./

Jesus goes deeper into Gentile territory. A group of friends beg Jesus to cure a man who is deaf and has an impediment in his speech. I have known several people who have been deaf, my chairman, one of my husband's partners. We took communion to a brilliant man in this congregation, Forrest Pollard, who became extremely deaf later in life. His only words to me during the visit and the Eucharist were, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." I don't know if he understood me, but you know the Greek word, Eucharist means "thank you." I think of him now every time I see the word Eucharist. If a person has been deaf from birth or early in life, his speech is distorted, for he or she has forgotten or has never heard words. There is a tendency to think they are stupid, "deaf and dumb" but there is nothing wrong with their mind.

Listen to Tom's story.

*"I am about fifteen when I suddenly go totally deaf. I soon realize that the most important thing in life is being connected, which happens most of all through hearing. I cannot hear voices of friends, words of comfort, hope, and advice. At first people try to communicate with me but soon they grow tired. My friends become exasperated when I miss their meaning. They tire of writing notes to me. I become embarrassed by their embarrassment. I become isolated and lonely within myself. Soon I forget how to talk. Since I cannot hear myself, I have no control of how loudly I am speaking. I am constantly told to raise or lower my voice. Insensitive people laugh at my stammering. I eventually give up and lose the ability to talk. I cannot explain myself. No matter how strong my feelings are, no matter how afraid and anxious I am, I keep it bottled up inside myself. I am left to myself. I do not contribute anything to the community and gradually feel that I am useless and in the way."*⁴

Jesus heals the Syrophenician daughter from afar, but pulls this deaf Gentile off in private and gets a little more earthy and physical, putting his fingers into his ears, and spitting and touching his tongue. He then says our theme for the day, "Ephphatha **EHF-uh-thuh**. Ephphatha **EHF-uh-thuh**." Be open. Mark puts it in Jesus' native Aramaic tongue, perhaps for emphasis. Jesus heals this second Gentile, now without question, and on his next stop on the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee, he has compassion on 4000 hungry Gentiles who have come to hear him and feeds them with seven loaves and a few small fish. Crossing borders, breaking down boundaries.//

By the way...Another boundary between St. Luke's and the outside world was again broken here in this church on Monday evening when our red doors were opened wide and music lovers from all over filled this nave to hear the unbelievable music that took place in this acoustically beautiful sanctuary. You see, sometimes boundaries can be broken simply by opening doors and offering a gift that we had all along.

The parable in James of the prejudiced usher reminds us of the paid pews in Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, Virginia, a church I frequented in my youth, where only the rich could sit in places of honor in colonial times. Jim Wallis and his friends in seminary decided to find every verse in the Bible that dealt with the poor and social injustice. They found thousands in Matthew and Mark, one out of ten verses, and one out of seven verses in Luke. They cut out of an old Bible every text about the poor. Much of the Psalms and Prophets disappear. They created a Bible full of holes. That is what happens

when we only minister to ourselves and forget about the poor, outside of our borders, outside of our red doors. We become a church with holes. St. Luke's gives food to local food banks and has a hands on ministry to the poor at our Veterans Dinners and we are beginning a hands on ministry with the sacks of water and food each of you were given several weeks ago to give personally to the homeless we encounter every day. Our outreach team will be taking food bags that our DOK will be preparing to the homeless who travel paths along the Arkansas River both in North Little Rock and Little Rock. Jeannie Fry is inviting more to join their group, crossing another boundary. Jeannie and I also attended last week the Governor's two day Summit for faith based ministries involved in prison release and foster care. The conference was planned by our own Betty Gulman who is the governor's liaison to DHS. Keep in your prayers how St. Luke's might respond to these men and women looking for a second chance as well as to children who have become orphans, most commonly secondary to substance or physical abuse by their parents.

Last week Carey and I also had lunch with the Rev. Tyrone Broomfield, the minister at Bethel AME Church in North Little Rock and his wife. We are also hoping to have more connections in ministry between our two churches, perhaps in prison ministry.

It is easy for churches who move out to the suburbs to forget the poor, for the poor no longer surround them. This beautiful church St. Luke's is surrounded by both wealth and poverty. To see the poor we only have to look across the street. JFK is our boundary.⁵

Ephphatha **EHF-uh-thuh**, be open, listen. / Jesus listens, is open, and hears the love, the pain, the hurt of the Syrophenician woman and realizes his ministry crosses boundaries. He is a boundary breaker. Ephphatha **EHF-uh-thuh**, be open, listen, hear, speak your own truth. /Do you have a boundary you are being called to cross? Listen deeply and hear the truths that others are speaking, people in the world outside of these walls that are in need, people in need of the gifts we have. Cross the border for the healing of the world... and for our own healing.⁴

1 Brett Younger, Lectionary Homiletics, August, September, 2015, vol. 26, no. 5, p. 48- 49.

2 Lewis R. Donelson, Lectionary Homiletics, August, September, 2015, vol. 26, no. 5, p. 43-44.

3 Andrew Foster Connors, Lectionary Homiletics, August, September, 2015, vol. 26, no. 5, p. 47.

4 Kathy Donley, Lectionary Homiletics, August, September 2015, vol. 26, no. 5, p. 51.

5 Peter Rea Jones, Feasting on the Word, year B, vol. 4, pp. 39-43.