

“Jesus Goes to School”
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James 2:1-10, 14-17
Mark 7:24-37

The night before school begins, I bet some of you have some rituals you try, whether you impose them on yourself, or your parents make you do them. You line out all your school supplies and make sure they are neat and ready. You pick out the clothes you want to wear the next day. You go to bed at a reasonable hour, to get a good night's sleep. Maybe you already know who your teachers will be, and what friends are in your class-- or if you are the teacher, you may already know who your students are, and so you spend some time imagining what the character of your class will be like as you picture their faces. I wonder what other back to school rituals you in the congregation have practiced.

Whatever it is you do, you want to be ready! You want to feel like you have what you need. You want to feel awake and focused. You want to be open: to new people, new ideas, new challenges.

That, at least, is for the first day of school. At some point in the year, however, the rituals may look different. Instead of 5 brand new, crisp folders, you can only find one, and it is tattered. The pencils that had each been perfectly sharpened have dulled, and the eraser on one has been used so much that the metal has started to scratch your paper. And that openness you brought to the first day of school? No need for that anymore. You have figured everyone, and everything, out: who is friends with whom; what teachers will let you get away with skipping homework; what items on the school lunch menu are worth ordering, and what days it's best to bring your lunch. If you are a teacher, you may get to that point in the year where you've had one too many nights grading papers, or read a student evaluation that just made your heart sink. And, chances are, there might be some days when that hopeful eagerness becomes dread, because you are nervous about a test, or someone in school said a remark that devastated you, or because you have not yet found that thing in school that gives you joy.

But the start of the year is more about hope for what *can* be-- even in the midst of these times, when we still have to take COVID precautions, and just when we thought those were figured out, we get a message from the schools telling us that school will start a day later due to last week's flooding. No biggie; after over a year and half since kids have been able to go to a full day of school, what's another day? We've had the whole summer to rest, after all.

Where we find Jesus in today's passage is more like the middle of the year when things don't look crisp, hearts aren't open, and maybe there's even a little bit of dread. We see earlier in the chapter Jesus already had to stand up to a group of bullies-- religious people trying to harass

Jesus and his disciples for how they eat. Maybe Jesus is concerned that their harassment with words will turn into something worse, like physical violence. For whatever reason, Jesus is looking for some time from himself. He went away to the region of Tyre, and entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.

Well, someone *did* find Jesus. A Syrophoenecian woman-- Matthew's gospel calls her a Canaanite woman-- comes to him and begs him to help his daughter, who had a demon inside of her. And I have to say, I have a lot of empathy for this mom. As a parent myself, there is not much I will not try in order to advocate for my daughter, so that she can be healthy and learn and live, so that as she grows she can be respected to make decisions for her own body, so that she can express her religious and cultural heritage, so that she can love and be loved. And I hope we can advocate for these things for all the children of our communities-- not just our own.

But Jesus' answer is not the bright, welcoming, or compassionate response we have come to expect from Jesus. In fact, it is kind of awful. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Did Jesus actually call a woman a *dog*? I realize we are in a time when many among us have been thrown racial slurs, especially these past two years, and I know some in our community have even felt unsafe commuting to work because of rising hostilities. And so, reading that Jesus said this takes my breath away as I think of your pain and what you have endured.

Some might make excuses for Jesus, saying things like "It wasn't his intention to be hurtful, he was just falling back on language that all the people in his community probably used for Canaanites-- who had a long history of conflict with the Jews." Others might say that Jesus used this language to test others who might have been listening, like the Pharisees who had been giving Jesus such a hard time around purity issues. Some would say that he was just tired, cranky, overworked, and-- like many of us do when we are tired, cranky, and overworked-- let some awful language tumble out of his lips.

I'm not sure what made Jesus talk in a way that was so demeaning. But instead of centering this story around Jesus, we would do better to center it around the woman who demanded healing and justice for her daughter. The first time she asked for Jesus' help, she asked nicely. She bowed down at Jesus' feet, and begged him to help her daughter. But when Jesus dismissed her with an ethnic and sexist slur, she persisted. She cut through every layer of oppression that separated her from Jesus-- as a woman, as a Gentile, as a Canaanite-- and answered him in a way that opened him up to compassion and accountability. And, her words changed Jesus. He sent her home, to find that the demon had left her daughter.

People called Jesus the title of "Rabbi," which means teacher, or master. In fact, of the 90-something times Jesus is addressed directly in the bible, in 60 of them, they call him Rabbi, teacher, or master.¹ But here in this gospel story, we see the reverse happen: a woman

¹ Diana Butler Bass makes this observation in her book *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence*.

becomes the teacher for this rabbi; she, an outsider, tells him “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Not only was this a clever comeback, it is very true-- in our home we never need to sweep after our meals, even though we can sometimes be clumsy eaters, because we can count on the dog cleaning any morsel we drop. Especially the children’s food.

But what this mother is reaching for is far more than the crumbs from the table. She wants an opening at the table, so that she and her daughter might eat and experience *life*. As Jesus’ teacher, she shows him something about opening up space. We can tell Jesus has been schooled, not only in the fact that he decides to heal the child after all, but also in what happens next.

As he is traveling back toward the Sea of Galilee, some people bring to Jesus a deaf man, who also has a speech impediment. Now, among the deaf community there is a culture and pride. Some deaf people today would not choose to be hear even if it were possible. But the people accompanying this man want him to be healed. This time, Jesus pulls the man aside, puts his fingers in his ears, spits and touches the man’s tongue-- I know that’s way too much of an exchange of bodily secretions for these COVID times, but things were different then-- Jesus looks to heaven, and sighs, and then says to the man, *Ephphatha*, which means, “Be opened.”

Be opened. I wonder if Jesus could have said that if he had not just been taught by the Canaanite woman. Jesus unstopped the ears of the deaf man so that he can hear; but first, the Canaanite woman opened Jesus’ eyes so he could see.

James’ letter reminds us of Jesus’ rule, which first came from Torah, to love your neighbor as you love yourself-- and that showing distinctions between people-- especially in ways that dishonor the poor-- causes us to fail that essential teaching of our faith.

So as we start this year as teachers and as students-- and I like to think that all of us are both teachers *and* students, whether we are in school or not-- I want to repeat something that Jesus said: *Ephphatha*: be opened. Be open to who is not invited to the table, and consider offering them an invitation. Be open to what you may not be seeing, or may not be hearing, because the people you are around all the time aren’t talking about these things; Your most important teaching might come from these unexpected margins. And, be open to change: that God might change you through a person or experience, or even that those who have hurt you or failed you can be changed, too.

I know that so much in the world right now feels like crumbs that people are in competition to gobble up. But I want to remind you that one day, we will feast. When you take a seat at that table, will you be there because you know you have an invitation? Or will you be there because you insisted and persisted your way there? Regardless of how you get to the feast, I hope you will be surprised and opened by whom you will see sitting at the table with you.