

Sermon for September 8: *Ephphatha: be opened to connect to God's world*

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean —

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down —

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away. ***Please be seated***

This Tuesday is the posthumous birthday of poet, Mary Oliver, from whose well-known poem, *The Summer's Day*, I just read. I think one of the main reasons that so many people deeply connect with her poetry is Oliver's *connection to nature*, to wonder and to Devotion. Connection.

The word in Aramaic that Jesus uses in healing the deaf and mute man —

Ephphatha — is immediately translated by the writer of Mark's Gospel to the Greek word *Dianoigo*, which can mean "be opened" in English. You know what else it can mean? *Connect*. For when we open our ears and our eyes and hearts to truly perceive God's love in creation, only then can we truly *connect* with all.

By *opening* we can begin to perceive new forms, new systems, and ways of living and communicating. Not only in the Greco-Roman binaries of "rich and poor", of "honor and shame", but of the more subtle system of *connection*, valuing relationship more than possessions. A different kind of economics.ⁱ

In Sallie McFague's Book, *A New Climate for Theology*, she wisely observes that ". . . none of the world's religions has as its maxim: 'Blessed are the greedy'". Yet, as I explored her comparison of "Christianity and Planetary Economics" I saw a definite *disconnect*. While I'm on the topic of language, did you know that the Greek word for "house" – *Oikos* – forms the root for all the "eco" words, such as economics, ecology, even ecumenism. These concepts are all connected in the *house* of God; while we don't tend to want to talk about economics in church, "the earth's resources must be distributed justly among all its inhabitants . . . "for the whole household of the planet to flourish . . . on a sustainable basis".

On some level, we all understand economics as a "matter of life and death".

McFague reminds us that "(its not just) life and death for human beings, but for the planet itself and all its life forms. . . not just about money but about sharing resources among all who need them". She asks us to consider that "economics is a justice issue, so why would religions not be concerned with it?"

Unfortunately, for centuries now, Christians along with everyone else, have been part of "a worldwide society that accepts an economic theory that supports insatiable greed on the part of individuals, regardless of its consequences to other people or to the planet".ⁱⁱ So what do we do? The writer of the Letter to James exhorts us to action, but what is our discernment in that praxis?

To answer that, let's turn back to the first story in today's Gospel reading, that of the Syrophenician Woman. She is the only person in Mark to ever win an argument with Jesus! Respect! She also seems to *open Jesus up* to greater inclusiveness in his ministry. I've gotten push back about this point from those who may not embrace Jesus' humanity as much as I do. But knowing that Jesus could still change and grow, as the Son of Man, gives me hope for the rest of us!

The story makes it clear that Jesus was in a "Gentile" area, and that the woman was not Jewish. The rather shocking slur of "dog" Jesus throws at her may have something to do with the name used to refer to a particular sect in Greek philosophy, the Cynics; it may have been because Jesus was feeling overwhelmed.

Perhaps Jesus went to this region of Gentiles to get away; at that point he understood his mission as with the Jewish people. Now here was this *woman (!)* all up in his face and asking for favors! Maybe Jesus got mad! Gasp! And, as a Cynic, perhaps, the woman (what shall we name her? Give her the name of your favorite outspoken woman!) (mine is Molly). Molly clapped back by using her wits and turning Jesus' argument on its head. Wait a minute: *that's what Jesus does!* I wonder if Jesus realized that even he, even he might have been influenced by the systems of power in that time. And he apologized by healing her daughter.

On the first Sunday of each month, we now offer healing prayers during Eucharist. In this sacrament, the priest or other minister physically lays hands upon the care seeker, *or on behalf of someone remotely*. There is something universal about Jesus' healing stories, isn't there. Whether it is in person, with physical touch, or over wide distances, healing energy seems to impact more than just the person seeking. When Jesus *opens up* the ears of the man, he looks up to heaven, almost as if he is *opening up the understanding* of anyone hearing the story. What healing choices can we make that not only benefit our own lives, and those of our immediate family and friends, but the whole of God's creation? Even those we will never even meet. How can we pray, discern, and act in ways that welcome everyone into the banquet of God's extravagant love, and work together to "preserve the integrity of creation", as we promise at baptism? Perhaps it begins with *Ephphatha*, with opening and with connecting. Perhaps it can begin with the humility of wonder. Let us close by finishing Mary Oliver's poem to inspire us:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? **AMEN.**

ⁱ McFague, A.New.Climate.for.Theology?pg 83

ⁱⁱ Ibid,