

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
September 9, 2018
Title: On the Mend: Healing Inhibitions
Scripture: James 1:1-8, 14-17
Mark 7:24-37

Probably my least favorite ride at an amusement park is the roller coaster. The chances of you finding me on a roller coaster – even a small one – are a pretty solid zero. I don't handle the sudden ups and downs and fast speeds and turns. While others are laughing and screaming, I am simply scared.

I can easily avoid roller coasters at an amusement park. However, it is impossible to avoid the roller coaster ride of life. There are sudden ups and downs that we cannot anticipate and in our age of instant communication, a phone call, text message, email, face book post can bring that roller coaster right into our lives when we are least prepared. In case you're wondering, yes, I do feel like I've been on a roller coaster ride this week and I know that there are others who feel the same way.

So, what, if anything, do today's scriptures have to say to those of us who are riding a roller coaster – or to any of us who are simply trying to live? At first glance, it may not seem as if there is much there to help the roller coaster ride, but if we dig a little deeper, we might be surprised. Our faith gives us anchors that help keep us grounded when the roller coasters threaten to overwhelm us.

Our scriptures remind us that our faith is about love – about God's great love for each and every one of us – a love that reminds us that we are not alone and that will hold us tightly when the roller coaster ride gets scary.

When we are on a roller coaster, the quick changes in direction give us a very different perspective than we have when we are standing on the ground watching. Part of our faith is about opening our minds to new ways of learning about and knowing God and God's presence with us on the ride.

On an actual roller coaster, we don't have to make decisions about which way we are going to go. Our direction is controlled by the tracks of the ride. On the roller coaster of life, however, sometimes we find ourselves going in directions we didn't choose, but even then, we have many decisions to make and our faith can be the important guide that helps us in making those decisions.

Making decisions involves taking action and James reminds us that faith and actions go hand in hand. In fact, he insists that faith, by itself, if we have no actions, is dead.

In today's scriptures, we hear and see love in action. We see new ways of knowing God, and we see actions that open the door to all those whom God would welcome.

In last week's gospel, Jesus challenged the religious authorities who thought that tradition and following the rules was the most important thing. They believed that following the traditions and rules should guarantee them a position of honor in the faith. Jesus taught that it was our intentions, our motives, our attitudes, our actions that made a difference.

Today, that message is reinforced. In our gospel today, we have two stories of Jesus having traveled outside of Jewish territory, outside of the area where things for the most part made sense. He may have traveled away in an attempt to get some rest, to not have people clamoring after him all the time for healing and teaching. He may have traveled away to have

an opportunity for renewal. Mark tells us that he entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.

But a woman approached him. In Jesus' culture, women did not approach men, but this woman did. The Pharisees looked for what they thought was due to them because of the tradition and what they have earned. But she came simply begging for compassion based on her need, not on any tradition, not on any right or privilege. The story of the Syrophenician woman is either a favorite of many people, or one that is deeply disturbing.

I have preached whole sermons on her story and there are a wide range of opinions about how to understand it and what is happening here, so I'm taking a bit of a risk in summarizing what I think is important in this story.

If we believe that Jesus was not only fully God, but also fully human, then we have to allow Jesus to act like a human. In this story, he is acting like any Jewish man of his time would. Jews and Gentiles did not interact unless absolutely necessary, and the tension between Jews and someone from Tyre in Phoenicia, modern day Lebanon, was huge. She was a descendent of those who had inhabited the land when the Israelites had invaded.

She approached Jesus, begging for healing for her daughter. Their exchange is the only one in Scripture in which Jesus is challenged by someone and seems to lose the argument.

She has challenged him insisting that she doesn't have to be a Jew or meet certain criterion for Jesus to heal her daughter. She would have been discriminated against on the grounds of her gender, her race and her

class. She recognized the new life that Jesus offered and she would stop at nothing to get it for herself and her child.

Later James would write that we need to be careful not to show preference for people who look, dress, or appear a certain way. That may not seem radical to us because generally we at least give lip service to that understanding.

However, it is still true today that in too many situations, we fall for the illusion that a person's life or worth is found in the things he or she possesses or in some other value we use to determine a person's worth. If you doubt this, think about how we often describe an innocent victim of a shooting or another crime as a good student, a loving parent, a promising athlete, or some other descriptor that rightly insists that they didn't deserve to be the victim of a crime. However, we seem to imply that someone who doesn't fit that description might be less valuable and that the same crime committed against that person would be less of a tragedy.

The reality that Jesus came to understand through his encounter with this woman and through his openness to his Heavenly Father, was that all persons – not just Jews – were loved and cherished by God.

This week's Upper Room Disciplines put it beautifully. "We are all created as children of God. We share common human experiences: our need for love and care, our knowledge of what it is like to be frightened or lonely, our ability to feel both despair and joy. At the end of the day, whether we lay our heads on silk pillowcases, or a canvass bag on a curbside, God loves and values each of us."

We can be assured that wherever the roller coaster of life is taking us, we are loved and valued by God. There is nothing that we can do that makes us more, or less, valuable and loved by God.

The very next episode that Mark tells us about shows Jesus a long distance away, on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. There has to be a significant amount of time passing between these stories, yet they are tied together. Again, Jesus is among Gentiles, non-Jews, and here he meets a man who is deaf. The people who brought him to Jesus, begged Jesus to heal him. Jesus took him aside and, in more detail than we hear in any other healing, we are told that Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears and spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed deeply and said, "Ephphatha", that is "Be opened." Mark tells us that at once his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Jesus didn't hesitate to heal this man. Jesus told him and his friends not to tell anyone, but good news is hard to keep to yourself. They told everyone they could find and were astounded. They proclaimed, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." This calls to mind a passage from the prophet Isaiah that is talking about the Messiah, the one who will prepare the way and make the paths straight.

What does it mean to us and to others to have our tongues opened, to be able to speak the truth to power, like the Syrophenician woman does? What does it mean to us and to others to have our ears opened so that we can hear God's word and God's will in ways that we have not heard them before?

When we are on the roller coaster of life, we may find that our ears are opened to hear both God and others in ways we have not heard them before. We may find that our tongues are opened to speak the truth to

power, to be advocates for ourselves or for others when those words are most needed.

The scriptures today remind us that all persons – including ourselves – are loved and valued by God. They remind us to treat each person as a special child of God. They invite us to recognize, as Jesus did, our privileged positions and to re-evaluate them. We are invited to face our prejudice, to observe and change our exclusiveness into inclusiveness.

One Sunday a friend of mine intentionally wore clothes to church that were torn and dirty. She pulled a worn hat down on her head and did not look anyone in the eye. She entered the church building and took a seat somewhere near the middle of the sanctuary. No one spoke to her, and in a relatively crowded sanctuary, there was a very noticeable empty space around her.

Despite the fact that she was very active in the church and well known by most people, no one recognized her dressed this way. No one spoke to her. No one welcomed her. The only one who knew who she was, was the pastor with whom this had been pre-arranged. It provided a vivid illustration for the congregation of James message about treating people differently based on the way they are dressed.

Both Mark and James challenge us to re-examine how we treat outsiders.

This week I listened to a webcast by two pastors who were discussing the scripture for this week. Robb McCoy, who is a United Methodist, said that he can't help but think of our denomination slogan "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors' in light of the ways that we struggle with issues of openness and inclusivity."

He said, “I’ve always chosen to hear that slogan not as descriptive, but prescriptive. In other words, I hear the ‘open’ as a verb, not an adjective. It is what we are called as a church to do – to go out and open hearts, open minds, and open doors.” He hears it as a mission statement, not a description of us now, but as a prayer of who we might become.

He wrote a prayer that is prayed in his congregation every week. “Gracious God, Open our hearts to the story of your love. Open our minds to new ways of knowing you. Open our doors to all whom you would welcome.”ⁱ

I think this is a good prayer for us. It encourages us to find the voice that God has given us. It challenges us to be open to new ways of relating to other people, of living our faith so that it is not words only but also actions. It helps us heal from some of the obstacles that have prevented us from fully being the people God created us to be. It provides a solid footing and anchor for our lives as people of faith who often find ourselves on the roller coaster of life.

ⁱ McCoy, Robb. In “Pulpit Fiction” Episode 287. www.pulpitfiction.com