

A sermon delivered by Katherine Beckett, seminary intern, at The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 6, April 27, 2008, and dedicated to the glory of God!

**“Be Opened”
Mark 7, 31-37**

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As part of our seminary education, we are required to immerse in another culture. During the summer of 2006, I took advantage of the opportunity to immerse in the culture of Namibia which is in southern Africa. While there, I was privileged to stay with the Kaijere family: Eunice and her three mostly grown children, Jerry, Unoo and Tjitembua.

On one of the days I had to spend the entire day with the family, Eunice was called to help relatives in planning a funeral. Jerry had to work and Unoo was studying for the entrance exams to the university. That left Tjitembua, the youngest member of the family, and she and I spent the day together.

Tjitembua is 17. Now, I don't typically spend a lot of time with teenagers. However, I was 9,000 miles from home with nothing to do so I spent the day with her. But Tjitembua is not just any teenager. She is

vibrant and outgoing, she models and has made a few TV commercials. And, oh yeah, Tjitembua is a deaf mute. Stricken with meningitis at 6 months, she lost her hearing. Going deaf at such a young age, she never learned to speak.

Tjitembua often feels cut off from society. Her family is fluent in sign language, which they began teaching me the instant I arrived, because like here, most people in Namibia do not know how to sign. It is difficult for her to communicate with people outside of her family and her school. She is unable to go out alone, and needs someone along to hear and help her communicate with others.

The deaf man in our gospel lesson would also have been cut off from society. It is most likely that there was no formal sign language in the first century, so he and those close to him would have had to figure out a way to communicate. The first century people were an oral people. They did not write things down, which is what Tjitembua and I resorted to often. They related things orally. A deaf person would be left out completely. Hence the need for the healing.

While in Namibia, I became very sensitive to the pace of life. Namibia moves at a much slower pace than the US. Namibians tend to walk every and the Kaijere family does not own a car. While they are walking, they are not glued to a cell phone, plugged into an Ipod or wrapped up in their own thoughts. They are interacting with the people around them. There is a strong sense of connection and community of which everyone is a part. I was amazed at how

quickly I was included in the community. even though I was obviously from the outside.

When we live life at a fast pace and are constantly distracted or tuned out from the world, we tend to be closed to new ideas. Cut off from our surroundings, we are also cut off from the opportunity to receive new information. We in essence become deaf mutes. We are not listening to those around us or interacting with those in close proximity.

Another tendency we have when we live life at too fast a pace is the tendency toward extreme conservatism with our emotions. When we become too emotionally conservative, we are closed off from others and cannot make the connections. To risk, either by loving or giving, is difficult for a person who has become isolated, rigid and unbending. We can get so caught up in the fast pace that we cannot slow down, connect with others to build and maintain relationships. Some people become so bound up in themselves that they cannot reach out and connect with others.

In our scripture lesson after Jesus puts his fingers in the man's ears and his spittle on his tongue, he commands them to "Be Open!" Not be healed but be open, free of their bondage. The next phrase when literally translated from the original Greek reads "the hearing is opened and the bondage of the tongue is loosed." The tongue is freed of what has been holding it back.

Jesus' command to be open is both a joy and a threat. It is a joy to be opened, freed from whatever bondage has been holding us back, like too fast paced a life. It is a threat to not have the comfort of that bondage, which is holding us back, like all the distractions of life. Behaviorists have found that cage-trained animals will remain in the cage even if the door is open. The animals are more comfortable in their confined space and choose to stay there. We are the same way with our bondage, our fast pace. We sometimes choose to stay bound, running through life, rather than slowing down to risk the unknown or unfamiliar.

To be opened as Jesus commands us here, we have to want to be. The deaf man in the Gospel was brought to Jesus; he did not seek Jesus out. He was brought there by well-meaning friends and family. But he was open to allowing the Spirit of God to work in him and through him to change his life for the better.

In Namibia, when Unoo was preparing to leave for her study session, she informed me that Tjitembua wanted to take me around visiting. Unoo reminded me that I would have to do all the talking. That's right, I would have to go around this black neighborhood, which was established out of the policies of apartheid, knock on doors and invite my companion and myself in. Not exactly the kind of experience I am used to being opened to.

But by being open to it, allowing God to work in me through this beautiful teenager, I had an incredible, life-changing day of meeting new people,

making new friends and hearing stories and traditions of a foreign culture. I met mothers who sent their children to school during the 1980s and Namibia's war for independence and have never seen them again. And I met some of those children, now adults, who left home one morning and were away from their families for years. One of those children was Leah, a delightful woman. Leah grew up in the northern part of Namibia, near the Angolan border. One day as she and three of her sisters were leaving school, two big trucks from the South West Africa Political Organization arrived and gathered up all the children.

After being driven across the border into Angola, the children were ordered out of the trucks. They were then divided into two groups. Those who looked to be 16 or older were placed back on a truck and sent back to Namibia to fight for SWAPO in the war for independence from South Africa. The remaining children, including Leah, immediately became exiles and were sent to live with families all over Africa.

Leah and one of her sisters went to live with a woman in Sierra Leone, a seven hour trip by plane from Namibia. While in Sierra Leone, both sisters earned not only a high school diploma but college degrees as well. As daughters in a family with 10 children whose father had died, the sisters would have had no opportunity to attend college. Any money the family would have had would have gone to educate the boys.

After ten years of living in exile in Sierra Leone, Leah returned to Namibia, seeing her mother and

other siblings for the first time since leaving for school that day. Married to a man she met in Sierra Leone, she has a husband and two children she would not have had had she not been sent into exile that fateful day. And the education provided to her by SWAPO in Sierra Leone has landed her a high-ranking government position. Leah works to help the government keep up with the needs of the influx of refugees from northern Namibia into Windhoek, which is in the central part of the country.

Open to the possibilities of her life in exile, Leah has been blessed with a beautiful family, reunited with her birth mother and family in Namibia, has another “mother” in Sierra Leone and the education that allows her to be an invaluable asset to her own people trying to eke out an existence in the world’s oldest desert.

In what ways is God asking you to be open? To whom or to what is Jesus commanding you to “Ephphatha?” Take the risk and be opened. It may change your life forever. Amen.

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