

Sept. 5, 2021
Hope Lutheran Church
Rev. Mary Erickson
Mark 7:24-37

Surprised by Grace

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

There's an old saying: "A ship in harbor is safe, but that's not what ships are built for." In order for a ship to fulfill its purpose, it must drop anchor and venture across the sea.

In a similar way, each of us has our comfort zone. But just like a ship must leave harbor, we also need to step outside of our comfort zones. That's where we stretch and develop. Growth occurs when we leave our comfort zone and engage the unknown.

- Going to school
- Going to summer camp
- Starting a new job
- Picking up a new skill
- Trying out for a sport or a play
- Volunteering
- Getting married; for others, getting divorced
- Moving
- Starting a family

All of these actions move us squarely out of our comfort zone. But that's where the growth happens. And more: that's where we're surprised by something new. It might be some ability or strength we didn't know we possessed. It might be the kindness of a stranger. It might be the realization of a new way of seeing the world. But there will be surprise.

In our reading today from Mark, a lot of people are stepping outside their comfort zones. Jesus and his disciples step outside

the familiar confines of Palestine. They travel into Gentile country. Their first destination is the coastline of Tyre. From there they head to the Decapolis area on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Each location is populated by non-Jewish people. But Jesus' mission leads him beyond the comfort zone of Israel and his own people.

When they arrive in Tyre, a local woman immediately recognizes Jesus. She barges into the house where he's staying and kneels before him. She starts begging for her daughter who seems to suffer from epilepsy or some other seizure-related disorder.

In so many ways, this woman has left her own comfort zone. She's barged into the home of a stranger. She grovels on the ground before a foreign man who worships a foreign god. But when you love someone, especially your own child, that's what you do. Without giving it a second thought, you step out of your comfortable place. And willingly, you find yourself doing things that you would never have had the courage to do in the past.

In the second story, the friends of a deaf mute bring him to Jesus. How they must have loved him! They bring him to the Jewish healer, and like the Syrophenician woman, they beg Jesus to heal him.

So many people are stepping out of their comfort zone. And in each instance, they are surprised. Jesus is surprised by the moxie and the faith of this bold mother. She won't take no for an answer! And in turn, she is

surprised by the grace of healing. Her daughter is made whole.

In the Decapolis, Jesus takes the deaf man to the side. He sticks his fingers in the man's ears. He spits and then touches the man's tongue. Then he looks to heaven and pronounces a guttural cry: "Ephphatha!" he says. The word sounds so primal to our ears. Be opened!

Does Jesus speak the word only to the man before him? Something about the cry seems to echo beyond the deaf and mute man. Does Jesus command "Be opened!" to his disciples? To the Gentiles? To the nations? To all of humanity?

We need to be opened! Our closed minds and hardened hearts need to be opened to new ways of thinking and acceptance. Fists clenched in anger need to be opened with forgiveness and the hand of friendship. Our locked, miserly coffers need to be opened in generosity. Yes, we need to be opened! The world needs to be opened!

A poem by Malcolm Guite reflects on the phrase Ephphatha:

Be opened. Oh if only we might be!

Speak to a heart that's closed in on itself:
'Be opened and the truth will set you free',

Speak to a world imprisoned in its wealth:
'Be opened! Learn to learn from poverty',

Speak to a church that closes and
excludes,
And makes rejection its own litany:
'Be opened, opened to the multitudes
For whom I died but whom you have
dismissed
Be opened, opened, opened,' how you sigh

And still we do not hear you. We have missed
Both cry and crisis, we make no reply.

Take us aside, for we are deaf and dumb
Spit on us Lord and touch each tongue-tied
tongue.

Allowing ourselves to be opened up requires that we step out of our comfort zone. But in being thus opened, we'll be surprised by grace.

How do we as a congregation need to be opened? How is the Holy Spirit calling us out of our comfort zone? Stepping outside our comfort zone is a leap of faith. Let's pray:

Open us, Lord. As we leap into new territory, we trust that you are faithful. In being opened, let your healing light enter us. Surprise us with your grace. Amen.