

“Be Opened.”

- Many years ago, when I was still in high school, I was in the band
 - I played alto sax, and loved it
 - We had a great director, Mr. Stuart, who could quiet a room of over 100 teenagers, bring us to full attention, just by stepping up to the podium
 - Now the band at my high school was a concert style group during the spring
 - And we worked on tone, skill, and in making great music.
 - But in the fall, during football season, we were a marching band
 - We got our thrills from hearing our sound echo off the other side of the stadium
 - And playing songs that the audience danced and sang along with
 - And marching on the field creating images drawn out of us standing in the right places
 - Just last week, during the liturgical training, I told them at 60% of serving at the altar is worship and prayer,
 - And the other 40% is marching band
 - Don't quote me on that
 - So I have been thinking about that these last few weeks, and I remembered the strangest thing as I was stirring in Starbucks on Friday writing this sermon
 - I remembered an unspoken tradition that happened at the beginning of each football game
 - At the first kick, after the coin toss, the snare drums would do a drum roll, we would all hold our instruments up in the air
 - And the first Kick, the kickoff to the whole game, the ball would go up, up, over....
 - We would hold our instruments high, hold our breath collective breath, and build the suspense as that ball made its arc in the air
 - Full of hope and optimism that this game might be a winning one
 - All until the moment that ball came down, and was caught, and the game began in a rush.

- But that opening kick, the kick off to a game, the hope, the anticipation-
 - We were doing our best to set the stage for a winning night
- Today is not much different for us
- We are setting ourselves up for another year as a team, today the ball goes up and up, and hopefully lands well
- We are kicking off our new program year at St. Micheal's
- And each year around this time I pause to consider just this question- what are we becoming this year? What is God's plan for us?
 - What are we kicking off that's worth this effort and attention?
- There's a lot here, I think.
- Now before we get into the specifics of our Kick off today, I want us to spend a little time with our Scripture readings
 - Both the Epistle and the Gospel shines some light on the type of people we should be
 - And certainly the type of Church we should create
 - Like last week, we are still reading from the book of James- we only hear from James once every three years in our lectionary
 - Now we heard just last week how the book of James sometimes takes a little heat
 - A number of years ago, I came across a commentary website¹ that, regarding the James reading for today, said:
 - "Be sure not to listen to the Second Reading."
 - And then, "Turn your heart's hearing aids off and that reading won't bother you so much."
 - That website happens to no longer be there...
 - Martin Luther, as Lisa told us last week, was leery of the book of James as well, and believed it could be used to support a works-righteousness kind of faith
 - Or earning salvation through good works instead of through faith alone
 - That was a part of his criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church at the time
 - Luther went on to conclude that, "'Faith is a living, restless thing. It cannot be inoperative. We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith'"²

¹ Retrieved in 2009, http://liturgy.slu.edu/23OrdB090609/theword_gillick.html

² Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Mentor Books) 259, retrieved online in 2009 from <http://www.ntrmin.org/Luther%20and%20the%20canon%202.htm#a6>

- One thing is for sure- James holds our collective feet to the fire.
- When I hear James, I like to think of James as expounding on the second part of the Great Commandment Jesus gives us:
- 1st part- Love God, 2nd part- Love your neighbor as yourself
- So let us give James his due- he is describing what a faith based community should be like *because* of its faith
- And that is especially relevant to you and me today on Kick off Sunday
- James says it should be a place where worldly distinctions among people are removed
- James describes a community that does not show partiality based on the world's standards
- Rich and poor alike are welcomed and treated with dignity and hospitality
- Welcomed for who they are more importantly whose they are... that they are God's children
- James goes on to say that a faith community must live it- walk the walk
- Be not hearers only, but doers
- And he warns of a faith that bears no visible fruit
- Jesus is known for saying similar things, but he usually directs his criticism towards the Pharisees of his day
- Just last week we said that it is what comes out of a person that defiles
- And it is from the human heart that evil intentions come
- You could very easily then say the opposite, that from a heart of faith and love comes good things
 - That sounds a lot like the book of James
- And today we continue with the very next verse in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus goes first to the region of Tyre, and then on to Sidon
- And in my opinion illustrates both the negative and the positive of how we should welcome people without distinctions
- It's worth noting here that Tyre and Sidon were not thought of as good places for the Jews³
 - Jesus uses them in Luke's Gospel as examples of sinful cities, and in one place Jesus even uses them for comparison purposes
 - Telling another city they were even worse than Tyre and Sidon!
 - So we are not in the "nice part" of the region
- And yet, Jesus goes.
- He was trying to hide, to not be noticed, maybe he was exhausted and needed some rest

³ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper18b>

- Maybe the fame and popularity was getting to be too much
- But he was seen, and a woman from the area came to Jesus and asked for him to heal her daughter- to cast out a demon
- And Jesus demonstrates to us right here how easy it is to slip into the distinctions we all take for granted
- Because of her race, her ancestry, maybe her gender, he calls her and her people dogs
- It's kinda hard to hear, huh? From Jesus?
- But she is quick witted, and says that even dogs get to eat the crumbs under the table
- Can you see Jesus take a sharp breathe, can you see him realizing the cultural baggage around him, the distinctions that were automatic
- Can you see him choosing, and illustrating to the disciples and to us, what we should do when we become aware of our own prejudices
- He healed the women's daughter
- He went on to Sidon, and without a word, healed a deaf man who had a speech impediment.
 - Jesus said, "be opened". Be opened.
- He brushed up against one of those unconscious distinctions that each of us were given by our culture
- And he tore it down.
- There's a lot of debate about whether Jesus did all of this intentionally and as a lesson to the disciples,
- Or whether Jesus was tired and cranky and let his humanity show a little too much
- But the take away is this: when we find the prejudices, when we find the places where we draw distinctions between the faithful
- We know what to do next- we begin to over come them
- We know the type of works a good faith produces, we know the type of fruit a vine grafted onto the true vine makes
- Now of late it has been obvious that throughout Christendom, the Church (big C) has not always done this well
 - Despite our Scripture, despite the teachings of Jesus, and especially despite the book of James
 - Every day another article pops up about how human frailty and temptation has eroded the trust in the church once again- esp. over the last 6 months.
 - How the name of Jesus has been coopted and used for personal gain and power grabs

- Sometimes those with the name of Jesus on their lips harass, abuse, and harm those around them and in their care
- And sometimes Christians are the loudest voices of bigotry and prejudice out there
 - And most willing to draw distinctions between people
- Today more than ever, we need good churches and faithful Christians who bear good fruit.
- Places of health, safety, nourishment, Godly love.
- And we can be that. At St. Michael's. We can and will do that. **We must.**
- Because there is a need- a need for churches to be doing what churches, and people of faith, are supposed to be doing- thank you James.
- I guess two weeks ago I wrote in my Sword article, and talked about a study that said nearly half of all Americans feel lonely.⁴
- It was a study conducted by Cigna, the big insurance provider
- 54% of respondents said that they feel that no one actually knows them.
- 40% say they feel isolated and that relationships are not meaningful.
- The harvest is plentiful.
- The church, at its healthiest, at its best, when it is opened to God and to each other
- That church is what this world is aching for.
- Be opened.
 - As a goal kick off Sunday, maybe that one is a good one.
 - Be opened.
 - **Be opened this year to God-**
 - Come, pray, worship, and listen.
 - I want St. Michael's to be a place that facilitates those very things- especially in our Sunday morning worship
 - I want your faith, your connection to God, to be fed and invigorated each and every week.
 - Through hymns, Scripture, sermons, and liturgy
 - **Be open to each other, and to the next person who walks through that door**
 - I want that faith, our collective faith, to be one that welcomes people without distinction or preference
 - Who shows warmth and hospitality to each person we see

⁴ <http://fortune.com/2018/05/01/americans-lonely-cigna-study/>

- To be a place that celebrates difference, and difference of opinion
- I want our ministries and small groups- all of the ones with tables in the community room today-
 - To be places of spiritual nourishment, where faith can grow.
 - And places of outreach, where faith can be seen.
- I want us to be a community, a family even, for those who need it
- For the lonely, for those who long to be known.
- We can know them, walk with them, and remind them that God too knows and loves them.
- I want us to be opened
- May God open us, our hearts, so that our faith cannot help but shine through
- This year and years to come.

Amen.