

Allowing our hearts to open to God's love helps us come alive

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 9th September 2018

A woman whose daughter was possessed by a demon came to Jesus for help. She wouldn't have been the first parent believing her child had a demon in them. She must have loved her daughter very much to seek Jesus out like that though.

Let's put some flesh on this story about a demon being cast out, which is the way such things always are anyway. There are no such things as demons flying around the air, taking over people's lives. It's more a psychic pattern in someone's life, which takes a particular form and exists only in particular circumstances.

So, let's suppose that the name of this demon possessing the woman's daughter is called Johnny. The mother doesn't like Johnny. He's a few years older than her daughter, he comes from a rough family. His father is in trouble with the law, he drinks too much and is lazy, but what bothers the mother most of all is he doesn't respect women, and in particular, doesn't respect her daughter. Johnny thinks he is superior, because he's a man and he likes to be in control. The daughter doesn't see this, because she is infatuated with him. If they're not together, she's always texting him. The only time she leaves the house is to go out with him. She's possessed by him.

The mother finds Jesus and asks him for help. It seems that Jesus can sense what the woman has come for, so he provokes her, hoping to illicit the response she needs to make. He calls her a dog. That's the sharpest, most offensive and personally critical word he can use to describe her.

In Jesus' day, the word dog was used in a derogatory way for women, as is the word 'bitch' today. Men who called women dogs believed their intelligence was on the level of an animal. They considered men to be rational, whereas women were simply reactive, like animals. But for this particular woman, this mother, it was personal, because she'd been on the receiving end of that term too often. She'd had a husband who called her dog one too many times, so now she was a single mother, trying to raise her daughter, who now had got herself tied up with someone just like that nasty man who had made her life a misery for years. And now, the very person she went to for help, had called her a dog! (Actually, he didn't specifically call her a dog, but suggested she belong to the groups who are dogs.) With that one word, the lid on her pain had been opened, she was back where she was years ago, and in danger of becoming unhinged. At that point, she realised she hadn't really come for her daughter, or rather, she had, but she had also come for herself. She had wounds that needed healing too. And at the very moment she realised that, she knew she had to choose what mattered most to her – her pain and anger, or her strength and wholeness.

She chose strength and wholeness. She was not going to let this guy calling her a dog get in the way of what she wanted, not just because she wanted it so much, but because the strength of her conviction was so strong, that she knew it didn't just come from herself. It seemed so right to her, something which should just be, and something which she perceived in the one calling her dog, i.e. Jesus. It was a conviction that her daughter mattered, as every person matters, and so herself included. She had seen evidence of that conviction in the way Jesus treated people and spoke up for people. And even though he was goading her, she felt deeply valued by him, and that he was trying to get her to value herself in that way too. When she did, when she chose strength and wholeness over pain and hurt, they clicked, for there was divine love within each of them and between them. That released the Holy Spirit into the world and so the woman's daughter was healed.

The mother goes home and finds her daughter, alone, sitting at the table, with freshly baked scones and a pot of tea to share with her mum. 'Where's Johnny?' she asks. 'I sent him away', the daughter replies, 'he was no good for me. I think I just liked him because you didn't, but I'm over that now'.

We read in the gospel account that when the mother returned home, her daughter was 'lying on her bed', but the correct translation is she was 'reclining at the table' which is code for being restored to her place in the world. It means she was fully herself once more: whole and flourishing.

Sometimes problems of those we care deeply about can be resolved after we attend to what are really our own concerns. Dealing with our own anxieties or frustrations about their life can set us free, which, in turn, can have consequences for them. Finding our own strength can release the Spirit for them too.

In his usual pattern of inclusivity, the writer of Mark's gospel adds to a story about a young girl, one about an older man, as a way of saying that healing is available to all who connect with Jesus.

The man was deaf, with a speech impediment. We can think that Jesus' cure enabled his ears and mouth to work properly, but that would be failing to see the deeper action here. When it comes to hearing God and speaking what God tells you, it is the 'heart' that counts. His deafness was symbolic. Like many Jesus came across, the man couldn't hear God's loving voice speaking to him, so consequentially had nothing original to say. His opinions were nothing more than those given to him by the world around him.

Blocking the man's ears, Jesus blocks out the various voices which prevent him hearing God's loving words, words such as Jesus speaks. In responding to this man, Jesus is channelling divine love into him. But he can only receive it if he opens his heart, just as the mother with the possessed daughter opened her heart to God through the strength of her love (for her daughter and herself).

There is no magic at work here, Jesus simply commands the man to open his heart to God and so receive the divine Spirit within himself. Jesus can open any of our hearts to God, if only we are willing to get close to him.

This willingness, which we call faith, may seem beyond our grasp. But that's only when we get it the wrong way around. Faith is more to do with God, than us. It's not so much about how much we believe, but about trusting that God is what God claims to be. Faith is letting go in a way that lets God be God for us and do whatever God will do for us. A good image of that is the trapeze artist. One person swings out and lets go of the swing, with nothing more they can do. From then on, it's totally up to the other trapeze artist to catch them. The catcher is the active one. In the same way, faith is putting ourselves in a position for God to catch us, or opening our hearts for God's love to pour in. Sometimes we must follow the strength of our instincts to where our soul knows it needs to go, and other times we just need a little help opening our heart, before we feel the love that is trying to get in there or rise from within there.

Healing isn't always straight-forward, mostly because we tie ourselves up in knots and hide in our complications, but at least the good news is that Jesus is always close by, wanting to do what is life-giving to him, which is to give life to us. His love is as persistent as the woman he called a dog, his strength is as gentle, and his commitment to our well-being, as deep. That means he will always be there for us, but will look nothing like a celebrity healer, nor act like a magician to wave away our problems, or the problems of those we love.