

Sermon: “Calling in’ Jesus from the Margins: The Inclusive Faith of The Syro-Phoenician Woman” (Scripture: Mark 7:24-30)

July 2, 2017

By: Dr. Jenny Whitcher

The following children’s message and sermon were written by Dr. Jenny Whitcher, as an invited guest preacher to Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ in Denver, CO. This sermon was part of a Sunday series titled, “Jesus said what?,” which directly engaged what are often considered challenging scriptures within the Christian Church.

A Time for the Child in All of Us

Do we have any baseball fans?

What do you enjoy better? Watching baseball or playing baseball?

I prefer to play baseball. Baseball is a slow game, and I have a hard time paying attention to the game if I’m just watching it and not playing.

Do any of you remember learning how to catch the ball? What was that like?

My dad taught me how to catch the ball. He would throw pop-up balls high into the air.

But I wasn’t able to catch the ball right away. Can you guess why?

Because my eyes were closed and I couldn’t see the ball to catch it. I was afraid the ball would hit me in the face, so I closed my eyes.

It is really hard to catch a ball with your eyes closed.

Sometimes, God tries to get us to open our eyes and pay attention, but we are afraid of what God might ask us to do, or we are too busy or distracted to hear God, or too set in our ways and not willing to learn or do something new.

If we don’t keep our eyes, ears, and heart open to God, we miss out on some of the really important opportunities in life, like loving one another, being generous and sharing with others, and taking care of each other.

Will you join me in prayer?

Dear God,

We know that you invite us to pay attention differently.

To understand from our hearts.

To see with our eyes and hear with our ears,

Where you are present in the world.

Help us to pay attention to you

Especially when we are afraid.

Amen.

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Sermon:

Imagine you are a parent trying to teach your child how to catch a baseball, but your child squeezes her eyes shut every time the ball comes towards her no matter how well you coach: “Keep your eyes on the ball!”

Your child is just not getting it. Not getting it for *hours*.

Now imagine you are throwing your last pitch of the day, hoping your child might actually catch just one ball today, so that your effort might not be in vain.

As you throw the ball, you see movement out of the corner of your eye. The neighbor’s golden retriever leaps through the air majestically, right in front of your child’s outstretched baseball mitt. The dog triumphantly chomps down on the ball, lands gracefully on the grass, and lays down to chew on its prize.

Now, tell me, what words come to mind that you might say to that dog?

Remember, your hot, sweaty, tired, and frustrated. So, don’t any of you tell me that you’d respond with: “Good boy! What a good boy!”

What might you yell, whisper under your breath, or think to yourself about that dog?
[congregational responses]

Things that come to my mind are: Get out of here, dog!

In a similar moment of exhaustion and frustration, Jesus said to the Syro-Phoenician woman: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and give it to the dogs.”

Pastor Chris picked a good scripture for today as part of a series titled, “Jesus said *what?*”

Clearly, we need some context to understand why Jesus referred to this woman as a dog.

Just before this exchange between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman, chapter seven of Mark begins with Jesus arguing with the Pharisees and scribes.

The Pharisees and scribes were a highly influential community of authoritative religious law scholars within Israel, who zealously taught both the written Law and oral Law, otherwise known as the “tradition of the elders.”

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The Pharisees and scribes question Jesus: We see that your disciples are not washing their hands before they eat. Why are your disciples not living according to the tradition of the elders?

Jesus rebukes them, calls them hypocrites, and attempts to teach them the truth about God versus the absurdity of their unholy religious-cultural laws.

Jesus then turns to the crowd and proclaims, “There is nothing outside of a person that by going in can defile, but rather, it is the things that come out of a person that defile.” In this proclamation, Jesus publicly rebukes the cleanliness laws promoted by the Pharisees and Scribes.

After Jesus had left the crowd, his disciples approached him and asked what he had meant by this public statement.

I can only imagine Jesus is exasperated at this point because he’s been throwing the ball all day to the Pharisees, the scribes, and a whole crowd of people who just don’t get it. And now his own disciples, who by the way were with him all day, also don’t get it.

Jesus responds to the disciples, “Then do you also fail to understand?”

Jesus goes on to explain that it doesn’t matter how clean one’s hands, food, or dishware are—these things cannot defile a person. Food goes into the stomach and out to the sewer, end of story.

Instead, it is what comes from within, it is evil intentions from the human heart that defile a person.

Our scripture reading for today begins with Jesus heading out to the opposite side of the Galilee province to the border of Israel and Phoenicia. Jesus “entered a house at the border and did not want anyone to know he was there.”

Raise your hand if:

- You have been a preacher? Keep your hand raised if you can.
- Teacher?
- Parent or grandparent?
- Supervisor?
- Trainer?

Great. So how many of you have had of those days where absolutely nobody listens to you and nothing you did worked out and you just wanted to go live on a private island and never see another human being again? But you can’t because other people still need you. Me too.

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I think Jesus was having one of those days.

I don’t know about you, but when I have those kind of days, it makes me feel like a failure. Sometimes, on a really bad day, it can even make me question whether I know what I am doing at all, or if I’m in the right vocation as a professor.

Jesus is exhausted, frustrated, feeling like a failure, because he can’t seem to get anything across to Israel, to the chosen children of God, who by covenant Jesus is sent to teach. They don’t have ears to hear, or eyes to see. They just keep closing their eyes and missing the ball entirely.

In this moment of frustration and failure, Jesus goes away to be alone. Perhaps to lick his wounds a bit: “Some son of God I turned out to be, no one will even list to me. No one understands me. They certainly don’t see God in me. I just want to be alone, have a glass of wine and binge-watch Netflix.”

But here’s the thing, Jesus has been doing all these miracles and he’s been preaching in public throughout the entire province of Galilee, and well, he’s become a bit famous, so he doesn’t escape notice when he sets off to the Galilean border between Israel and Phoenicia.

And of all people, this golden retriever-like Gentile woman tracks Jesus down. So here Jesus is physically located right at the border, right on the margins, between the nation of Israel—God’s chosen people, and Phoenicia—those non-Jewish outsiders who the Israelites considered sub-human beasts, or dogs.

If this is sounding archaic to you, let’s translate to our current context. God had made a covenant with Israel to make Israel a “Blessing to all the nations” according to Genesis chapter 12. Israel had a similar role then to the Church’s role today, that is to reveal God’s true nature to others and to do God’s work in the world. In our contemporary context, this Gentile—or non-Jewish woman, would be someone outside of the church.

I am sure you can all think of a variety of people who would fit in this category, and you can also call to mind the various ways the Church has demonized, dehumanized, and committed violence against outsiders both in our present context and historically.

So here comes this outsider woman begging Jesus, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

You know that feeling when you are frustrated, want to give up, and then someone “calls you in” by name? Maybe it is the voice of a child, “Mom, dad, I love you.” Or perhaps it is the voice of a parent, spouse, or a close friend who holds you accountable by reminding you of who you are and whose you are.

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But perhaps it stings the most when the person who “calls you in” is someone you’ve put on the margins, pushed away, made separate or “other” from yourself.

When Jesus was at his lowest, this woman from the margins called Jesus in, bowed down before him, and addressed him as “Lord, Son of David”—the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy, the Messiah, Savior, Son of God.

Jesus responds, “Ugh, I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” Meaning, I’m not here for you or your people. You are not my responsibility, I have to take care of my people first.

The woman persisted, she knelt before Jesus and said, “Lord, help me.”

Jesus replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and give it to the dogs.” Meaning, I’ve spent all my energy trying to teach the students I was sent to teach, lead the congregation I was called to pastor, manage the team I supervise, and parent my children. I can’t just give to you too, you are not my people, my students, my congregation, my staff, or my children.

The woman responded, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

Even in the face of Jesus’ exclusionary, holier-than-thou rudeness, the woman faithfully calls him “Lord” and then she identifies herself with being a dog.

I’ll tell you what, as a woman, this is the part of the story that is most difficult to process. It does not help that this past week the president of the United States took to twitter multiple times to demean a female journalist calling her “dumb as a rock” and “low I.Q. crazy.”

But I refuse to believe that God would have this woman, or any woman, demean herself. So I have to imagine beyond patriarchal historical and present day cultural contexts, and beyond the male-gendered gaze of the Gospel authors.

Can you imagine with me, that this Syro-Phoenician woman is powerfully grounded in her faith, that perhaps she was led by the Spirit to call Jesus in at a moment in which he wanted to give up. A moment when Jesus’ humanness overtook him.

Can you see her there, holding up to Jesus a big metaphorical mirror, perhaps even reciting his own recently preached words back to him?

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

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“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Jesus responds, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

How great is the faith of this woman from the margins, that she comes before Jesus to remind him of his true calling?

Isn’t it true, that to this very day, it is those from the margins who continue to “call us in,” reminding us to “be the Church”?

This encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman was a transformative moment for Jesus in which he learned to be fully inclusive, to heal all who were faithful, not just the privileged, and chosen few.

We know that Jesus is transformed by this encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman, because the Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus left the border area and passed along the Sea of Galilee, where he went up to the mountain, and sat down to let the people come to him for healing.

Jesus specifically invited those who were diseased and disfigured and therefore prohibited by Law from places of worship, isolated from the community, and labeled “unclean” by the Pharisees and Scribes.

Great crowds came to Jesus, bringing with them those whose bodies were broken—those from the margins. They put the people at Jesus’ feet, and he cured them. The crowd was amazed and they praised God.

What a power-filled moment of public, progressive, inclusive evangelism.

Throughout the Gospel, we see Jesus’ disciples struggle with those on the margins, because at the time one had to be Jewish before they could be Christian. And being Jewish, meant following the Laws of the Pharisees and Scribes, which Jesus often argued against.

And yet, the disciples were watching the message of Jesus transform people outside of the Tribe of Israel, and they did not know what to do about it.

The disciples did not know how to include these outsiders, much like the Church has to continue to learn how to include those not already within our tribe. The most recent of which has been the full inclusion of individuals who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and

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Intersex, at least within the progressive Christian Church. But there is more inclusion work to be done within the wider Church, and we have more work to do in the progressive Church to address our embedded racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism, and xenophobia.

Christian friends, we cannot hide or step away from what we are called to do in the world. Even and especially when we are frustrated, exhausted, and overwhelmed. People need healing, and we need to continue to do ministry, even in the face of our perceived and actual failure.

There are many people outside of the Church who are “being the Church” better than we are some days.

And there are people inside and outside of the Church that wish we would more courageously claim our voice and stand up for what is right and just.

Two weeks ago, at the Pride Parade, I listened to people on the sidewalks watching the parade as our church and other UCC churches passed by them. I heard the most earnest, giddy, heart-filled affirmation of the Church that I’ve heard in a long time.

Warm voices of anticipation clamored:

“Look, the Churches are here. Yay, the church is here!”

“Thank you for being here. It means a lot that you are here.”

Next week we will celebrate our country’s Independence Day.

May we be reminded that as Christians, we are called to resist the unjust and immoral laws of the Empire, just like Jesus did.

We are called to seek freedom not through violence, colonialism, or capitalism, but rather through our faith in God lived out in loving relationship to one another every day. Even and especially on the days we want to escape humanity to a private island.

People from the margins have been holding up giant mirrors to the Church for far too long, trying desperately to “call us in.”

Begging us to remember who we are, whose we are, and that we are called to be healers and peacemakers to all people in this world.

Amen.

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Benediction:

May the Lord assure us that we are indeed prophets of welcome.
Let us go to proclaim this act of love, justice, and peace in God’s name.
Amen.