

Full Sermon – Peace Beyond Welcome

A Sermon for Peace Sunday

Mark 7:24-30

Before I begin, I feel as though I should make a confession: I have a love/hate relationship with welcome statements. I realize at this point, you may or may not be regretting asking me to speak at the celebration of the adoption of this congregation's Welcoming Statement, but I hope you will hear me out.

As a person who just happens to be gay, my experience of welcome statements has tended to fall along one of two paths. First, in the few spaces in my life where I have found myself in search of a new spiritual home, discerning how to translate prospective congregations' welcome statements has been one more way that I have found myself trying to navigate the endless minutiae of subtext. For instance, when my fiance and I decided to have dinner in an unfamiliar town a few weeks ago, I realized later that I had been looking at the list of restaurants and weighing words like tavern, pub, and bistro as if one or the other might tip the balance toward being a safe place for a gay couple to eat dinner.

Similarly, I have found myself having to try to read the subtext of words like welcoming, inclusive, open, and affirming to decide what they might really be communicating, how they might get lived out in the day-to-day life of that community. In my experience, words like these have a far reaching breadth of interpretation and certainly do not mean the same thing in every congregation. Granted, some congregations do this better than others by being clear and specific about their commitments to welcome, and I am glad to see the accompanying policies on membership, marriage, and ministry that this congregation has adopted. I would encourage you to make sure that however your welcoming statement is publicized, that these policies that make clear your commitments would not be buried on some separate, sub-linked page on a website or banished to wherever official church documents gather dust. Live them and proclaim them as the good news that they are.

In this first way, my experience of welcoming statements has been mixed. Likewise, the other way I have generally experienced welcoming statements carries some complex baggage. This second path relates more to the process by which welcoming statements typically come about and the ways that I have been involved in these dialogues. And let's be clear, these processes that produce welcoming statements always involve lots and lots of "loving dialogue." It's what we do as Mennonites, right?

John Linscheid summed up this kind of experience very succinctly in an article titled, “Done With Dialogue” that was written for a newsletter of the Brethren-Mennonite Council for LGBTQ Interests. Linscheid writes,

If loving dialogue is so loving, why do I end up hating it? ...Maybe because what the institution defines as “loving dialogue” is inherently condescending. By entering the dialogue, I accept the implicit proposition that our human worth and our status as children of God are questionable and must be proven....When I present evidence of the hypocrisy, unfair power structures, and patterns of privilege in the institutional church, I buy into the assumption that straight people rightly possess the power to judge who we are, what place we have in the church, and what our “lifestyle” ought to look like. I become merely a supplicant before their bench.

While welcoming statements represent the positive fruit of these dialogues, which I am so thankful for and which have helped pave the way for increased justice for LGBTQ people, they also often serve as a reminder that my place in the Church is something to be debated, that my welcome has depended on a vote, and that the inclusion of my gifts within the life of the Church has hinged on my willingness to become a supplicant before the bench, or a beggar hoping to gather scraps from underneath the table.

In the scripture read earlier, I think we encounter the story of someone else who might also be “done with dialogue” and the ways it can call into question human dignity by forcing one side to prove their worth to another. It is a funny little piece of scripture, and one that, if I’m honest, makes me really nervous. What can really be done with a passage where Jesus so blatantly uses an ethnic slur to dismiss a woman seeking help for her suffering daughter?

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

We can re-read this line again and again, accenting different words, trying to hold the thinly veiled language in a generous way, but in the end, it is hard to get around the reality that Jesus tells this woman no because she belongs to a different tribe, a tribe that Jesus’ words make clear is beneath his own tribe. To be fair, I suppose Jesus doesn’t tell her no, but only that the real children should be fed first, but this hardly helps us get past his description of the woman’s people and her ailing daughter as dogs.

There seems to be a lot at stake in the interpretation of this passage. Namely, how do we read this alongside the other stories of a welcoming, inclusive, compassionate Jesus?

There are a two main ways that people have been able to read Jesus' words to the Syphoenian woman while holding on to that image of Jesus. The first centers around the fact that the word Jesus uses to describe her people is the diminutive form of the word dog, a little dog, a puppy. For some this helps soften the blow of Jesus calling people dogs because who doesn't love puppies?

This might be a tempting way to read the passage, but then again I really doubt dogs in the first century were anywhere near the lovable pets we have today, even if they were little dogs. Dogs were scavengers and nuisances, and were a symbolic insult used to describe those who embody an unclean life outside of Torah observance.

If you're not convinced, just try putting the word "little" in front of any of our modern ethnic slurs and see how it changes them.

The other way that many people read this story while getting around the ethnic slur that Jesus uses is to see his comments as a test. In this way of reading, Jesus is in control of the conversation the entire time, using the term dog in an ironic way that spurs and nudges the woman to claim her right to the good news. Jesus would never so casually use insulting words to describe other people, so he is just opening up space for the woman and the disciples to learn a lesson.

While I do find this to be a little more helpful than the puppy line of reasoning, I'm not totally convinced. For one thing, there is nothing else in the passage to give the impression that Jesus' words are part of some ironic lesson. In addition, in the version of this story in Matthew, Jesus' dismissal is intensified when that author adds that Jesus first tries to completely ignore the woman's cries and that when the disciples complain to Jesus asking him to send her away, he tells them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." In both accounts, the comment about dogs is said directly to the woman's face.

For another thing, as much as the comments themselves seem uncharacteristic of the kind of Jesus we have come to expect, reading them as a test requires us to believe in the kind of Jesus who meets a woman in a moment of desperation with cold-hearted verbal games.

And while we could endlessly get caught up on debating the tone of Jesus' comments and the acceptability of calling people dogs, I think the bigger thing that is at stake in the interpretation of this passage is the question of whether we are able to have faith in a Jesus who changes his mind. Do we need Jesus to be the kind of savior who is in absolute control of every situation, who wins every argument, who has his entire ministry mapped out before him in perfectly precise steps. Do we need Jesus to be the kind of savior who never learns or

grows in understanding, who has never known a detour because he is always at least three steps ahead in every situation and conversation?

Or can we believe in a Jesus who changes his mind, a Jesus who is swayed by the desperate yet cutting response of this woman, a stranger outside the boundaries of his own tribe? Can we believe in a Jesus that grows in his understanding of a dynamic and uncontainable Spirit of God coming at him and interrupting him from a direction outside the trajectory he has already set himself on?

Whether or not you are ready to believe in a Jesus who changes his mind, if we set this passage in a little broader context within Mark's gospel, we see that the story of the Syrophenician woman's encounter with Jesus acts as a kind of hinge.

A few verses before this passage, Jesus enacts the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. The setting of this miracle places it in Jewish territory and the symbolic details included by the author point toward its significance for a Jewish audience. The five loaves nourishing the five thousand like the five books of the Torah nourish the Jewish community. The twelve baskets of leftovers for the twelve tribes of Israel. The Bread of Life blessed, broken, and given freely and fully in that place.

Almost immediately following the passage about the Syrophenician woman, we find Jesus feeding a multitude in a different setting, one that is largely Gentile territory. Here not only the setting changes, but the symbolic details as well; 4000 men fed with 7 loaves and 7 baskets of leftovers. People from the four corners of the earth gathered to experience the fullness of creation that came to completion in 7 days. The Bread of Life blessed, broken, and given freely and fully in that place.

And in the middle of these two feedings, we have the story of the Syrophenician woman. We have Jesus' initial jarring response. We have the woman's retort, insisting that even the crumbs from the table would be enough. And then we have a healing, and what seems like a reversal not only in response to one woman's plea, but the narrative of Mark's gospel seems to point to a reversal in a broader sense.

Can we believe in a Jesus who changes his mind in response to the Spirit moving within, around, and through him?

To me, this is what is at stake in our reading of this scripture because this is what it feels like is at stake for us today as the Church in a dynamic, quickly changing world. This is what is at stake for a Church that seeks to be peacemakers in a time when we must account for the ways we, at best, have been blinded, and at worst, have propagated policies and actions that

caused direct harm.

How can we be a Church that changes its mind in response to the Spirit moving within, around, and through it? And what does this mean for a Church that seeks to make peace by moving beyond welcome, beyond crumbs under the table?

One of the ways that our congregation at Columbus Mennonite has sought to explore this question is by taking a year to focus on the theme of race, white privilege, and Black Lives Matter. In a society that too often insists that the crumbs of “all lives matter” should be enough, we want to figure out how to be a Church that can boldly proclaim the good news in all its specificity that Black lives matter.

In my own study in preparation for taking on this focus, I have been greatly convicted by reading Jennifer Harvey’s book, *Dear White Christians*. Harvey’s work focuses specifically on matters of race within the Church, but the framework she develops has been transformational for me in ways that transcend race and, I believe, can inform all of the ways we hope to work toward peace and justice.

The main thrust of Harvey’s argument is that white Christians must move from what she calls the reconciliation paradigm toward a reparation paradigm. As Harvey notes, one of the most clear and well-worn manifestations of the reconciliation paradigm is the oft repeated lament from Martin Luther King Jr. that 11 o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated part of the week. This lament becomes the reconciliation paradigm when the focus of the Church’s racial justice work is centered around the problem of our separateness, as if simply getting people in the same room will solve the world’s problems.

While the goal is perhaps an admirable one, Harvey points out that too often this simply turns into predominantly white churches trying to figure out what they need to do to “attract” people of color to their congregation without ever considering that maybe White folks ought to be the ones who should make the move of relinquishing their power by joining Black churches. What is more, framing racial justice work through the reconciliation paradigm typically fails to account for the reality of whiteness by either completely erasing its legacy of oppression or treating it as a neutral moral zone. It fails to account for the differences of power and the fact that “racism and racial injustice are actual material conditions that shape all of our lives and mediate all of our relationships with one another.”

The separation we experience is merely a symptom and not simply the problem itself, and thus reconciliation on its own will be inadequate. It takes more than welcome to become strangers no more.

Instead, Harvey argues fiercely that our racial justice work must adopt a reparations paradigm that is rooted in a desire to become “repairers of the breach.” If our separation is merely a symptom, we must work to repair the concrete, material realities that have caused that separation before reconciliation can ever truly be possible. We must account for dynamics of power, legacies of oppression, and the systems that remain in place to ensure the continuation of that breach.

It is not enough to simply get people in the same room if one of them is still begging for scraps. Not only should we insist that all are welcome at the table, but we must go out and help create conditions where the other has no doubt of their place. We must be willing to repair any and all breaches between us even if it means repenting of the ways we have been complicit in their creation, even if it means giving up our need to control the direction we thought we would be going.

When Wanda first contacted me about preaching this morning, she noted that there was a general understanding in this congregation that the adoption of your welcoming statement and accompanying policies represented not an ending but a beginning. She said that you wanted to give some intentional thought to how you continue to live out these statements. While I have talked a lot this morning about the limitations of welcome and reconciliation, let me say very clearly that the work you have done along these lines is good news.

Indeed, many of us in those pictures out there are no longer strangers, but we have to consider what comes next. How do we build a peace that goes beyond welcome, beyond simply getting everyone in the same room. The problem with welcome and inclusion is that it too often means outsiders get to be included and absorbed into some already existing, static reality rather than becoming fellow conspirators and creators in a dynamic movement toward justice and shalom. Building a peace beyond welcome means that we might be interrupted, that we might need to push ourselves into unfamiliar territory, and that we might need to repent of the words we use and our complicity with system that alienate us from one another.

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