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Sermon  
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Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

“When the Outsider Became an Insider”

Scripture Text: Mark 7:24-30

Dear people of God, when I walk my dog, Sadie, I find that the people I pass seem more friendly. In our culture, dogs are frequently barrier breakers, a good way to open a conversation between strangers. When they see that Sadie is a border collie, they usually remark, “Oh, she must be very smart!” And then I usually respond by saying something like, “Oh, yes, last week she rewired our house.” In a culture where many households keep dogs as pets, dogs are naturally liked and seen as cute, furry animals that are beloved and an asset to have.

Our Sermon Lesson this morning also mentions dogs, but not with any warmth or affection. This time, a woman is called a dog. And clearly, the reference is to someone who is viewed as an outsider in that culture. This passage from the Gospel of Mark, and its parallel passage in the Gospel of Matthew, is one of the most challenging stories we have about Jesus. Candidly, it’s one that many would like to skip. It presents Jesus as not only unsympathetic, but downright nasty. This image of Jesus makes most of us uncomfortable.

You wonder why Mark, which was the first Gospel written, included it. This shows the honesty of the biblical writers that they didn’t try to hide the shortcomings of those who were considered the heroes of faith, whether Abraham, David, the apostle Paul . . . or Jesus. The fact that Mark included it, as did the author of the Gospel of Matthew, suggests that the story was widely circulated and that it held value for the earliest adherents of the Christian faith, even if it also created some problems.

At this point in his ministry, Jesus is traveling through areas where large numbers of Gentiles lived. And so, it's no surprise that a non-Jew is searching for him for help. Mark, always brief and to the point, tells us that she was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. Obviously desperate, she falls at the feet of Jesus and begs him to heal her daughter.

We need to be aware of how many boundaries this woman has crossed in this act. In several ways, she was an outsider. She was a pagan, a foreigner, a woman, perhaps sexually suspect, since no husband is mentioned, and definitely inappropriately pushy. And besides all this, she has a demon-possessed daughter! Jewish men, especially rabbis, did not speak with women outside of their family in public, and here was this foreigner, this non-believer, violating every possible social custom. And she knew it.

Despite all of these obstacles, we would still expect a compassionate response from Jesus, wouldn't we? After all, this is the same Jesus who previously healed on the sabbath, making clear that ministering to human need superceded any institutional rule. A helpless child needs his assistance. We assume that he will rush to her aid. Yet his response is the following: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27). You heard correctly. Jesus has just called this woman a dog.

In the ancient Near East, even today, if you call someone a dog, you have insulted them big time. Dogs were considered among those animals that were unclean in ancient Judaism. No matter how hard various commentators have tried to soften this blow that Jesus hurls at this woman, there is no getting around the fact that calling her a dog is clearly a disparaging remark. He is basically saying, "My kingdom is not for you Gentile outsiders, but for the children of Israel." Jesus is here

sounding like the perspective of the very tradition he has spent so much time challenging.

Remarkably, the woman doesn't leave after this cruel insult. And not only that, she gives it right back to Jesus in a rather clever way. She doesn't deny that she is a Gentile outsider. In fact she readily admits it. But she does it in a way that makes Jesus feel, how should I put it, ashamed . . . embarrassed . . . guilty? This is a mother consumed with love for her daughter, and here is someone who can help. She will do whatever it takes to make her daughter well. Those of you who are parents know what she is feeling. It's often those who have nothing to lose who will risk what others won't. She absorbs Jesus's insult and turns it back on him, saying, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28).

In first-century Jewish homes, no dog would ever have been allowed inside the door. Crumbs on the floor would have been swept up by a mother, grandmother, or older daughter. No unclean animal would have ever gotten near them in a devout Jewish household. But in Gentile homes, it was not uncommon for dogs to be inside, much as many of us have indoor pets today. Those of us whose dogs are allowed in the kitchen rarely have to worry about sweeping up crumbs! We rather have to worry about our dogs swiping something off the table or counter, which Sadie has done several times when Linda or I are not looking. In the ancient Gentile world, dogs very often lived within the family home.

After the Syrophenician woman's clever retort, I imagine Jesus's face breaking into a small grin as he realizes the truth this woman speaks. He doesn't get angry. Instead, he changes his mind. It's probably a turning point in his own understanding of his ministry. Jesus was human and had the capacity for growth in understanding and knowledge just like any of us. Like us, he had to shed that part of his cultural background that bound him to prejudices and stereotypes. This woman

was his wake-up call. She reminded him of the practical application of what he had been preaching all along. So Jesus turns to her and says, “For saying that, you may go--the demon has left your daughter” (Mark 7:29).

This woman, though unnamed, is the only character in the Gospel of Mark to win an argument against Jesus. In so doing, she teaches him something important about the scope of his ministry. No one is to be considered an outsider. The “No Dogs Allowed” sign has come down! Never again in Mark’s Gospel does Jesus refuse to heal anyone or question anyone’s worthiness to be healed. The dogs have now become dinner guests.

When Jesus leaves the Syrophenician woman, having granted her request, he doesn’t go back home. Rather he heads deeper into Gentile territory into the region of the Decapolis, the ten cities that were centers of Greek and Roman culture. With the exception of Damascus, the region of the Decapolis would be located today in the nation of Jordan. And there he heals another Gentile, this time a deaf man. Once Jesus understands that all people are to be included in God’s kingdom, he no longer hesitates to reach out to anyone in need.

This story is really about who are the insiders and who are the outsiders. You children who have gone back to school have probably already figured out the answer to that question. You already know who the popular kids are. While hopefully we adults have outgrown some of that, we also tend to separate ourselves into groups . . . and in the process, leave folks out. When I first came to Park Congregational Church, I visited former members who had left and asked them, “Why did you leave?” Frequently the answer came back, “Because I felt left out. Because I wasn’t part of a clique. Because the leadership of the church ignored me.” I don’t ever want to hear those answers again.

No one is to be left out in the new creation that God is bringing about through Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is for everyone. That includes those who think and act and look like we do . . . and those who don't. Like the disciples, we probably find it easier if our church consisted of those who were just like us, who dress the way we do, who speak the way we do, and who conduct themselves the way we do. We want people to be just like us. Well, you know, if you surround yourself with people just like you, you will never grow. If you are never introduced to different foods, different music, different ideas, different films, different ways of being in the world, you will never be enriched. We must reach out to the so-called outsiders not only for their sake, but for our sake. Like Jesus, we need to learn that God's vision of how the world should be necessitates that we turn outsiders into insiders. Amen.