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Open Your Mind  
Wesley Mimico United Church  
September 6, 2015  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on James 2:1-17 and Mark 7:24-37

Perhaps we should be pleased that it's Labour Day weekend today, and our numbers are down a bit. What better time for the lectionary to give us such a difficult gospel reading! If any of you would like to slip out quietly now, I completely understand.

But actually, I will confess to you that our story from Mark today is one of my favourite stories about Jesus. For one thing, it is a window into a different view of Jesus than perhaps we are accustomed to. And if nothing else, it's a great story to start a discussion!

I supposed I should start by asking if you heard the gospel story properly, and I will try to find out with this question: "Was Jesus a racist?". Yes, that's the question. Was Jesus a racist by today's standards?

In the story, Jesus calls a foreigner "a dog". There is very little room to allow us to dodge the idea that Jesus - a product of his own culture 2000 years ago - not only spoke a hateful racial slur directly to a fellow human being, but also, that he accepted the racist notion that Jewish people were superior to all other people.

Scholars and preachers have tried to tap-dance around this text for a long time. Some scholars argue that the word that Jesus uses for "dog" in the original Greek may in fact be better understood as a "beloved pet", or a "lap dog". They suggest that the term "dog" was a term of endearment. Other scholars have argued that Jesus winked as he spoke to the woman, suggesting that it was a "fun" label, not a racist label. They suggest that the woman likely enjoyed the hilarity of the joke herself. I don't know biblical Greek, but from the woman's reaction to Jesus's words, it is pretty clear to me that Jesus said something that the woman considered hurtful. In this story, Jesus is a racist by today's standards. Jesus got caught up in the non-rational, thoughtless racism of his own society.

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And in the church we have sometimes taken a different approach to this story which is to simply not read it, and perhaps to instead sing that old song, “Jesus loves the little children. All the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” But clearly, that song is about the Jesus that the church framed, not the Jesus that walked around in diverse, problematic situations who was forced to deal with foreign women when his cultural norms were anti-foreigner and anti-women.

Today, in our [predominantly] white church, we probably don't really like this story. We want to believe that Jesus was colour-blind, because we like to imagine that we ourselves are colour-blind.

So, what - exactly - is there to like about this story? Good question. Well, for me, the story is powerful for 2 reasons.

The first reason is theological. Or I should say, “Christological”, which is the fancy church word we use to describe our understanding of who Jesus was, and our thoughts about the relationship between Jesus and God.

I'm sure that each of us has our own ideas about the relationship between God and Jesus. The whole issue of whether Jesus was divine, and the question of what that would even mean leads to a whole spectrum of beliefs. The spectrum is a bit hard to nail down, but the end points of the spectrum are pretty clear. “High Christology” is the belief that Jesus was God. That Jesus was born with the collective knowledge and powers of God already fully formed. “Low Christology” is the belief that Jesus was fully human, and like us had to grow, learn, develop. That Jesus even had to learn how to relate to God, as we all do.

This gospel story does not end the Christological debate, but it certainly demonstrates a Jesus that was not perfect, not fully formed, not all-knowing. Jesus had things to learn - even from foreign women. And perhaps that is really what makes us uncomfortable with this story. In the words of Peter Woods, “I am surprised when people get angry at me for suggesting that Jesus learned as well as taught during his ministry. There is a common misconception that Jesus dropped fully enlightened and educated into

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the manger at Bethlehem. ... The life of Jesus makes the most sense as incarnation when we allow the humanity of the saviour to shine through.”

The second reason I appreciate this story is pastoral. It involves personal change and transformation.

Among other things, during this story Jesus goes from ignoring the woman and denying her basic humanity to actually listening - really listening - to the woman. And that real listening allows Jesus to change, to grow, to transform, to expand his mind to new possibilities. To me, that is where we find hope in this story. Even though Jesus’s knee-jerk reaction was racist, when Jesus was confronted, and when he actually listened, he allowed himself to change, and then he changed.

And when Jesus really listened, he heard the woman as a human being. But I think more than that was going on. When Jesus really listened, he heard the woman, but at the same time he also heard the brokenness of his own cultural reality. When Jesus listened, he not only saw the woman’s world, but he saw the inherent racism and narrow-mindedness of his own world. When Jesus listened, he not only helped the woman and healed her daughter, but he also healed himself from a social disease he wasn’t even aware that he had.

This story is a great example of the gift of “the other” in our midst. Because when we open ourselves to others, to people who are different, to people who we might have a negative knee-jerk reaction to ... if we really listen, we might help them, but we will definitely help ourselves and maybe even find our own healing.

One critical element in the story though is that after speaking the racial slur, the woman confronted Jesus. If the woman had herself simply written Jesus off as a loser, and had not confronted Jesus and his beliefs, the story would have ended very differently. For Jesus to find his own healing, the woman had to confront him first. The woman was a real gift to Jesus. The woman helped Jesus realize how ridiculous his biases were.

So, let’s bring this into the present tense. We all have our own biases too. But how do we know what our biases are? Well, the easiest way to find out is when we say something ridiculous, and someone else confronts us, calls us out on it. Of course, when

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people do confront us, we often take offence, and run from the interaction as fast as we can. But what - do you imagine - would happen if we really listened when people confronted us. What - do you imagine - would happen if we really listened and opened ourselves to the possibility that we need to grow and change ourselves. What - do you imagine - would happen if we saw people who confront us as gifts!

What biases do we hold that are holding us back? The gospel story is about racism, but in James, he paints a picture of what a non-welcoming church looks like: a church where the members give a lot of value to status, clothes, wealth, and other things. In fact, James speaks against all forms of partiality, because all partiality is based on the notion that some people are just a bit more special than other people. What biases are holding us back? Perhaps we don't even know. Perhaps we need to interact with strangers who will confront us ... and then we'll know what biases are holding us back.

I am delighted, by the way, that I cannot immediately name the biases that are holding us back. I myself do not have a laundry list of the ways we need to change. But biases are part of the human condition, so they must be present, even here.

And so, this week, I invite each of us to look with open eyes and minds, to find a person who - like the Syro-Phoenician woman - is willing to be a gift to us by confronting us and helping us see ourselves more clearly. To help us by allowing us to grow. To help us by allowing us to heal ourselves. People who annoy us are often hidden gifts, if we only listen ... really listen to them.

Oh, and one last thing I like about this story. I really like the fact that immediately after the confrontation with the woman, where Jesus opens his mind and his heart a bit further ... right after this story Jesus helps a deaf person to open his ears. Learning to open your mind is contagious!

I wish all of us a week of confrontation that brings us healing.

Amen.