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Open Your Mind  
Martin Grove United Church  
September 9, 2018  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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

Perhaps we should be pleased that it's still the tail end of the summer, 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 ridiculous, 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". Some 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 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 traditions.

And in the church we have sometimes taken a different approach to this story which is to simply not read it during worship at all, and perhaps instead to sing that old

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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 both anti-foreigner and anti-women.

Today, in our [predominantly] white United 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, I like it because it is powerful. The story is powerful for at least 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 preacher 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 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

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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 too. When Jesus listened, he not only helped the woman and healed her daughter, but Jesus also healed himself from a social disease he wasn't previously aware that he even 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 from social diseases we were not previously aware that we even had.

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? How do we know which of our biases are unhealthy - for us? 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 people do confront us, we usually 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

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possibility that we need to grow and change ourselves. What - do you imagine - would happen if we saw the people who confront and challenge us as gifts!

Do we ever really appreciate the people who confront us? This summer was GC43, which means the 43rd meeting of General Council. General Council is the gathering of people from all across the United Church of Canada. They meet to discuss and vote on many important aspects of how the United Church operates. But of course, they also have worship, which means sermons. One preacher they heard this year was Rev. Paul Walfall, a United Church minister from Alberta. And Walfall blasted the United Church for being racist. Racism still has roots in the United Church, and I see some evidence of it even here at Martin Grove United Church. Walfall of course is working to help the church heal from its racism, so instead of writing off the church, he offers this image:

If you follow the news at all, you know that groups - churches, governments, have heavily used the question “who is at the table?” as a way of including more people in decision making. The idea is that if we are having a discussion, we want a variety of voices present, so “who is at the table” has become a short-hand way of looking for - or affirming - inclusion of multiple voices. Making sure that many people are at the table is undoubtably a good first step. But Walfall pushes that image further.

Walfall asks, “who are you when you are at that table”. Think of Thanksgiving dinner for example. Because if you are at the table as a guest, then you are expected to take whatever is offered to you. If you are at the table, but in fact you are at the children’s table, then again, you are expected to take what you are given, your voice is not required and not even welcome. And if you are at the table because someone took pity on you, then you really have no voice at all and are expected to be grateful to be at the table at all. Walfall shared his vision of a church where all people are at the table, but they are there as equals. We are not there yet.

*[ask: racism in the church]*

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What biases do we hold that are holding us back? The gospel story is about

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racism, but there are lots of other biases that might be hurting us. For example, 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.

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.*