

**Catered or Pot Luck**  
**January 27, 2008 – Rev. Jim Cullen**  
**Mark 7: 24-37**

This is the season of Annual Meetings. It is a time when we reflect on the year past, get a sense of what we, as a church, are all about. It is an opportunity to elect or select some of the key decision makers for the next year. We look at both the financial past and the budget for the future. It is a time when we express our faith in terms of people and dreams and plans and hopes for the future. We can push back some of the boundaries that limit our sense of future. I believe that God uses this experience to help us consider who we are and what we can become.

I would like to begin this morning by looking at the two healing stories from Mark's gospel. The first story comes from a day when Jesus was on holiday, trying to get away and rest. A woman came up to him, asking for help for her daughter. Jesus' response was not very kind. ***Let the children be fed first. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*** It seems that Jesus, at this point in his ministry, was focused only on the Hebrew community. One cannot help wondering if there were moments in his life, as in ours, when he regretted his choice of words.

Her response – courageous, dignified, affects Jesus. Apart from anything else, he must have admired the brilliant way she turned his own words back on him. ***Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.*** And Jesus' response becomes warm and caring. ***For saying that, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.***

This may be a key moment in Jesus coming to understand his ministry. This is a story about pushing back boundaries. His response to her was inclusive. There was much that set her apart – her ethnicity, her religion and her gender. Yet Jesus moves beyond these to include her, to listen to her and to respond to her need.

The boundaries in the second story are no less important. This man cannot hear and as a result could not learn to speak for himself. Last fall Margaret Trudeau was in Belleville speaking about handicaps and disabilities that affect people's lives, especially emotion ones. She told this story; at least this is what I was told she said.

A husband thought that his wife was getting to be quite deaf. He decided to test her hearing. From some distance from the kitchen, he asked, "What time will dinner be ready?" He heard nothing. He took several steps closer to her, and asked the same question, and heard nothing. He did this twice more, the last time right in the kitchen. "See", he said, "you are deaf". Four times I asked you what time dinner would be ready and you did not reply". She responded, "Four times I told you – in 30 minutes."

The man in the Gospel story relied totally on what others could do for him. Such reliance involves trust. Because of Jesus intervention his ears and life are opened. We continue to have the same need for healing of ears and tongue. There are times when we hear but do not listen or understand. There are times when our spoken words hurt rather than heal, destroy rather than build up.

There was a story on TV this week about a movement that involves a purple bracelet, a rubber-like band. People are asked to put the band on one wrist. Every time they criticize someone they are supposed to move the bracelet to the other wrist. All day the bracelet is to move from one wrist to the other after a critical remark. This is to draw attention to how many times a day we criticize others. The goal, of course, is to not have to move the bracelet all day, all week.

Both these stories have the same message. Jesus relates to the woman who comes from outside his culture and religion and to the man who was excluded because of his physical disability. Because of persistence, because of advocacy, because of Jesus' willingness to walk outside the boundaries, boundaries tumble down, lives open up and people are enabled to get on with their lives in a new and wonderful way. People are reconnected to family and community.

In this January period of the year and of our lives, we can think about what these stories say to us. Where in our own life can we reach out, push back boundaries and become more inclusive.

Let us check our assumptions about life. If human life is a banquet, do you come expecting the meal will be catered or do you come, understanding that it is pot luck?

If we think that everything is being catered, we come, take what we want and go home. On the other hand, if it is pot luck, it means that we bring what we have, organize it, share it with others, clean up afterwards and then go home.

There are times when life needs to be a catered experience. In times of celebration – wedding anniversaries, birthdays, weddings, baptisms, promotions at work, – catered means that the many honour the few.

In times of tragedy, grief, loss of human life, even loss of property, it is right that those in need are catered to, supported by others. The sick and shut-in count on the care of others. Food, care and love are helpful tools in our responsibility for each other.

For most of us, most of the time, life should be a pot luck experience. It is in the giving we receive. We respond to each other with “authentic kindness”. We enjoy the sharing without anticipating receiving anything. We add what we offer to what others offer and we are all blessed.

We can apply this to our congregation and pastoral charge. A catered approach means that most of the people leave the work and responsibility to the few. To survive, or better, thrive; it is necessary for us to be pot luck people.

One of the key components to the pot luck life is humility. We are not the centre of the universe. What happens to us is not all that matters in the world. As someone said, “Leave a little bit to God”. Not everything in life is or should be up to us. It is not up to us to be the answer to every question. Sometimes it is someone else around the table that can best be the answer.

I conclude this morning with this last paragraph from a book by Rabbi Harold Kushner, Overcoming life's disappointments.

*“If you have been brave enough to love, and sometimes you won and sometimes you lost,*

*If you have cared enough to try, and sometimes it worked out and sometimes it didn't;*

*If you have been bold enough to dream and found yourself with some dreams that came true and a lot of broken pieces of dreams that didn't...*

*You can realize how full your life has been and how richly you are blessed.”*

God invited us to the pot luck table of life. We are invited to respond with the words we will sing to close this service ...

*‘Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me, I will hold your people in your heart.’ (509).*

Amen.