

September 6, 2009
Friendship United Church
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James 2: 1-10, 14-17 and Mark 7: 24-37

Parker Palmer calls "the tragic gap," the space between what is and what should be, the place between rich and poor, the place between the privileged few and the alien masses. It is the place where we are called to stand, for it is the place of the cross.

The church is the place that should always stand in the tragic gap. If we truly want to be inclusive to all we must stand in the tragic gap; the place of the cross. It may come as a surprise to some to have learned by our reading this morning from Mark that even Jesus had the capacity to be a bigot. Even Jesus at times got caught up in society's levels of inclusivity.

Jesus refers to the woman who has come for his help as a dog. The children of Israel are to be fed first, she is not an Israelite. This doesn't sound like the Jesus we know today? Very few Christians in mainline churches would think of Jesus as a bigot. In fact some of you may be offended that I have even used that term here this morning to describe Jesus. But our scripture reading this morning is making it quite clear and our English language today would clearly define what was said by Jesus as a bigoted statement. The Syrophenician woman today could have sued Jesus for refusing service based on that remark; and perhaps she should have but her retort to Jesus challenges him to look at his statement and to change his mind.

This is not the only place that Jesus is challenged on his remarks regarding who is worthy. There is the woman at the well, and the Centurion soldier as well as others. Jesus shows his humanness in more than one place in our gospels. The message to us today is that Jesus realizes his bigotry and adjusts his thinking and actions accordingly. He recognizes that it is not just the Israelites who have faith; that all people have the capacity, willingness, and call to believe in the life-giving goodness of God; the love that God has the capacity to give; the love of all races, genders, orientations, abilities, all isms and barriers are removed in God's love. We are one in God, literally. Perhaps this is the only thing we should or could take literally from the Bible – We are one in God.

It would have been nice if everyone had gotten that message like Jesus did and that throughout the ages it would have been taught over and over again so that today we had no barriers, no bigotries, no one-upmanship. Just think of all the things throughout history that would have been different; I won't go too far back – the Crusades, the Holocaust, both World Wars, no gathering up of people and putting them on reserves and in camps, no Apartheid, no Gaza strip and the list goes on and on.

The writer of James tried years after Jesus walked the earth to bring this message to the people again:

⁵⁻⁷Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? God chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God.

⁸⁻¹¹You do well when you complete the Royal Rule of the Scriptures: "Love others as you love yourself." But if you play up to these so-called important people, you go against the Rule and stand convicted by it.

Even in our time we have had people who have continued to try to bring this message to the people, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mother Teresa to name a few.

At General Council this summer our church was faced with two different proposals regarding our need to be open to diversity in our church. One deals with racism and cultural diversity the other dealt with the inclusion of gay and lesbian people and their right to all services in the church.

If you received your Observer this past week you may have noticed an article on racism. The article states that for some who think of the United Church as inclusive this may feel like a slap in the face however it is necessary for our Church to continue to confront and challenge the status quo because for many of us this seems like a non-issue and yet it is very much an issue for us today; particularly in the places where we don't think this applies to us and so we do not even discuss it. Churches in Rural Ontario can mistake the non-presence of cultural, racial and sexual diversity as a message that there is no one who fits these categories in our midst. We would be wrong in that assumption, we simply have not made it known that we are welcoming or understanding of their particular needs and issues. We must stand in the tragic gap between what is and what should and could be if we want to be the church we claim to be.

We must constantly be challenging ourselves to act on our commitment to the policies we set. We must confront our own bigotry if we are to reach out to the community in which we are a part because faith without works is dead. Jesus accepted the challenge of the Syrophenician woman told to us in Mark, to face his own bigotry and through faith her daughter was healed and Jesus was changed.

In the year 2000 our church adopted an anti-racism policy and six years later our church decided it would make it a priority to become an intercultural church. Here we are nine years later finally doing something. I wonder how many of us in rural Ontario have taken advantage of the resources put out over these 9 years by the church to accomplish this. We think we are inclusive, we think we are welcoming and yet our actions and reactions are so ingrained and so internalized we are not even aware of them. We live next door to a Mohawk Nation and yet we do not welcome them to our church. In fact I have been shocked at some of the comments and attitudes I have witnessed by members of the community regarding the native people, both here in ON and in SK. It is a country wide problem; it has been integrated and ingrained into our consciousness and made normal by a dominant, white-privileged society. We do not stand in the tragic gap with our native

brothers and sisters; we do not offer them a place between what is and what should be; we do not offer them that place of the cross.

Beginning as soon as next month and continuing into next year, all United Church paid accountable ministers will take part in racial-justice workshops with the hope that we will then bring these things we have learned into our churches.

But it is not just racism that our church struggles to overcome. Affirm United is holding a workshop in November at Marmora inviting congregations to open themselves to becoming an Affirming congregation. To be an Affirming congregation is to live the welcome we say we offer. To learn about gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and 2-spirited people and their experiences, to learn about racial diversity and gender bias. To challenge congregations in how they present their faith to the communities they serve. It is an intentional welcome to those who do not represent the status quo and to learn that they too have a place at the table, not just the crumbs that fall on the floor and for us to learn that they too have faith in an all loving God that we could learn from; that place of the cross.

I think that too often we believe that those who are not part of the mainstream do not have the same values and beliefs that we do and that is simply wrong. At the core of every human being is a desire to do what is right; to be in right relationship with their community and their God. At the base of all religious groups is a loving God. The golden rule of all religious groups is to love your neighbour as yourself. Our leaders may have differing methods and ideologies but the bottom line is the same.

All people everywhere only want to be treated with respect and dignity. This was the message of the Syrophynician woman and the message of the writer of James:

⁵⁻⁷Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? God chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God. And here you are abusing these same citizens! Isn't it the high and mighty who exploit you, who use the courts to rob you blind? Aren't they the ones who scorn the new name—"Christian"—used in your baptisms?

⁸⁻¹¹You do well when you complete the Royal Rule of the Scriptures: "Love others as you love yourself." But if you play up to these so-called important people, you go against the Rule and stand convicted by it.

Amen