

A Seat at the Table

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for Friendship Presbyterian Church
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16th Sunday After Pentecost

Mark 7:24-37

From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷ He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”²⁸ But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”²⁹ Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

In last week’s sermon, I focused on Friendship’s mission statement, “... to be an accepting and joyful community that centers upon worship, encourages personal growth, celebrates diversity, nurtures individual gifts, and moves beyond boundaries to share, through service, Jesus’ love, compassion, and justice in an uncertain world.”

This morning’s Gospel Lesson from Mark 7 led me to focus on yet another statement we claim. It’s the tagline, or subtitle, to our local church name on our website and printed publications, which introduces Friendship Presbyterian Church

as “a small church with a BIG MISSION.” It isn’t meant to be a comprehensive description of who we are. Rather it highlights only a couple of aspects of our self-perception – small in number but mighty in endeavor. Every Sunday we open our doors and gather in this place, we offer intimate, yet inclusive, traditional worship focused on the mission of God to the world. Our scripture lessons from both Mark and James would today have me add the words, “..without regard to social status.”

Without regard to the socio-economic status of the person to whom the offer is made.

The Lesson, read earlier, from James Chapter 2 reminds us that we are *not* to show favoritism to one person over another – whether rich over poor, or educated over uneducated, or insider over outsider. We are not to make the distinctions which come so naturally to us that we often don’t even realize we’re making them. They can be unconscious. But James says that if we *are* making them, we have an obligation to God to stop, so we can treat all comers the way God would treat them - without bias - without favoritism, or distinction, or judgement, or regard to state or status.

And in case you’re tempted to say, “Well, that’s just James, and he’s marginal. Paul didn’t teach against making distinctions. Jesus didn’t say not to show favoritism.”

But Paul did write in Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28) It does (kind of) sound like Paul is saying there is no distinction to be made between us once we belong to Christ.

And as for Jesus, well we have this story for today from Mark Chapter 7, in which Jesus *attempts* to make a distinction between Jew and Gentile, gets called out on it, and reverses himself.

When the Syrophenician woman approaches Jesus asking for deliverance for her young daughter, Jesus’ initial response is to deny her, based on her race. He answers, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” By children, Jesus means the Children of Israel, the Jews. By dogs, Jesus means the Gentiles – every other race of people.

Jesus *wants* to show favoritism to the Jews. In Matthew's Gospel, his desire is even more explicit, for Matthew has Jesus say, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Mt. 15:24)

But the Syrophenician woman doesn't give Jesus permission to write her off - or to write her daughter off. For she responds, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She doesn't try to argue with Jesus whether or not she's a dog under the metaphorical table – whether she's deserving of his attention and his help. She merely points out that people other than the Children or Israel have needs, too, are hungry, too, are sick, too, sometimes desperately so.

In that moment, Jesus sees her as a person and not just an annoyance – a little dog. He recognizes her worthiness and commends her faith. In Matthew, he responds, "Woman, great is your faith!" (Mt 15:28) In Mark, he says simply, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." The unnamed woman gets what she wants – healing for her child. But she also earns something more significant - the distinction of being called a child of God – and not just for herself, but for all of us "supposedly unclean" Gentiles.

And the metaphor of the table, where (race-)privileged children sit and eat and (race-underprivileged) dogs underneath beg for crumbs, is suddenly transformed. Since Jesus has recognized her, there is now a seat at the table for a Syrophenician woman, and for her sick daughter, and for us, as well.

If you've always *had* a seat at the table, it may be difficult to relate to the experience of *not* having one.

I'm reminded of a parable Jesus tells in Luke 14, which says, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner, he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses, '...Oh, I can't come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. ...Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'" (Lk 14:16-24)

I think this parable reminds us that just because we're accustomed to being given a place at the table doesn't mean we always will be. There's real danger in becoming complacent and thinking we'll continue to enjoy the privileges we now possess.

For there may be a time when, like those of the guests in Jesus' parable, our seats are given away to those who'll really appreciate them. And many of us will be left wondering at our inability to imagine losing them.

The safety net, to keep us from falling into this trap of unrecognized or underappreciated privilege, is to continue to identify with the Syrophenician women of this world – the marginalized, the oppressed, and the poor - the little dogs in Jesus' table metaphor.

I heard a story on the radio awhile back of a young Bosnian refugee who resettled, a couple of decades ago, to Clarkston, Georgia, only to go on to be admitted to an elite, private high school in Midtown Atlanta, then to Harvard, and the road to great success. The man attributed his success not to any intellectual ability or talent on his part but rather to a student teacher who was so impressed by an essay he'd plagiarized in his Clarkston high school that she'd singlehandedly got him into a much better school – the unearned gift, as he saw it, from which all his later opportunities arose. The staff of the radio program, *This American Life*, tracked down and interviewed that student teacher and learned that she remembers the refugee's story quite a bit differently. "Emir was brilliant," she said. She wasn't at all surprised that he'd enjoyed great success in life. It's what she would've predicted of him. As a matter of fact, she'd been watching the list of Nobel prize winners for several years expecting to see his name. He was that uniquely gifted, and it'd been a privilege to teach him. She hadn't known his essay was plagiarized from a stolen Bosnian library book; she didn't even *remember* the essay or being impressed by it. What she remembered was a bright young student who had a remarkable grasp of the English language, despite not being a native speaker, and an incredible ability to rise above his present circumstances. And she recognized how very rare these qualities are and was more than happy to help him along on his journey to a happy and prosperous life. (My Ames is True, By Michael Lewis, thisamericanlife.org)

Wow, what a different story! Emir's success wasn't the product of ill-gotten recognition by a high school English teacher impressed by a single, plagiarized essay. Rather, he was a remarkably talented student! He had a gift for seeing complex concepts simply and translating them for others. He'd narrowly escaped a war-torn country with nothing more than his own young life, that of his mother, and a stolen library book that had come to mean a great deal to him. He'd arrived in America with almost nothing, but he'd arrived prepared to make for himself whatever he could from the opportunities afforded him. And he had – over and over again.

Happiness/prosperity/privilege is never a guarantee – not for us or for anyone. And we should never take our blessings for granted. Likewise, when we meet someone who reminds us of the Syrophenician woman of the New Testament – an outsider - desperate, dirty, diseased, poor or neglected – we are to take notice. And we are to treat that person as a precious child of God, welcome her with a seat at our table, and share the blessings of God that we have been privileged to receive.

Let us pray.

God, you have taught us that abundant life isn't just for the wealthy, the elite, or the powerful, but indeed is your plan for all your children who love you and follow in the self-giving way of your Son, Jesus Christ. Call us and begin to equip us today, O God, to work together to assure that more of your children receive their fair share of Earth's bounty. Amen.