
The gift of “the other” in our midst
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
October 3, 2021
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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

I am grateful that the number of people present in the sanctuary is limited by COVID today. 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.

[image: was Jesus racist?]

I want to start by asking if you heard the gospel story properly, and I will try to find out with this question: “Was Jesus racist?”. I should qualify it a little. Because we can only answer the question from our perspective today. It is impossible to know if Jesus was considered racist by his contemporaries because we would need to understand the social norms 2000 years ago and also how Jesus fit (or didn’t fit) those norms. And we simply don’t have enough data to do that. But we can answer the question based on our social norms today. So a better question is, “Was Jesus racist by today’s standards?”

In the story, Jesus calls a foreign woman a “dog”. There is very little wiggle-room to allow us to dodge the idea that Jesus - a product of his own culture 2000 years ago - spoke a hateful racist slur directly to a fellow human being. And also, that he accepted the ridiculous racist idea that Jewish people were superior to other people.

[image: lapdog]

Scholars and preachers have tried to tap-dance around this text for a long time. Some scholars argue that the word that is translated “dog” may in fact be better understood as “beloved pet”, or “lap dog”. Other scholars have argued that Jesus winked as he spoke to the woman, suggesting that it was a “fun” 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 response to Jesus's words, it is pretty clear that Jesus said something that the woman considered hurtful, not fun. In this story, Jesus is racist by today’s

standards. Jesus got caught up in the non-rational, thoughtless racism of his own culture.

[image: Jesus loves the little children]

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 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.”

Well, I hate to be the one to break up the party, but those words are not biblical. Like, at all. There is that one gospel story that gives a sense that Jesus cared about children. But there is nothing about ethnicity in that story. The song “Jesus loves the little children” is based on who we wish Jesus had been. Not the Jesus we find in the Bible. Not the Jesus who lived in a diverse, structured, tribal society. Not the Jesus who was forced to deal with a foreign woman when his cultural norms were both anti-foreigner and anti-woman.

[image: colour blind]

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 is there to like about this story? And is Rev. Paul serious that it's one of his favourite Jesus stories, or is he just trying to keep us awake? Good questions. Well, for me, I like the story because it is powerful. The story is powerful for at least 3 reasons.

[image: christology]

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. Was Jesus divine? Or human? Or both? There is a whole spectrum of idea of who Jesus was. 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. Between high and low Christology, I'm sure that most of us fall somewhere between those 2 extremes.

This gospel story does not end the Christological debate. But it certainly affirms a

“low christological” version of Jesus. A Jesus who was not perfect, not fully formed, not all-knowing. A Jesus that had things to learn - even from a foreign woman. 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.”

[image: transformation]

The second reason I love this story is pastoral. Because the story involves personal change and transformation. During this story Jesus goes from ignoring the woman and denying her basic humanity, to actually listening - really listening - to the woman. And in that real listening Jesus allows himself to change, to grow, to transform, to expand his mind to new possibilities. To me, that is where we find hope in this story. Jesus’s knee-jerk reaction was racist. But when Jesus was confronted, and when he actually listened, he allowed himself to change, and then he changed.

[image: change your thoughts]

When Jesus really listened, he heard the woman as a human being. But that’s not all. When Jesus really listened, he heard the woman, but at the same time he also heard the brokenness of his own culture. When Jesus listened, he not only saw the woman’s world, but he saw the inherent racism and narrow-mindedness of his own world view. When Jesus listened, he not only helped the woman and healed her daughter. Jesus also healed himself from a social disease he was not 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 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 aware that we even had.

One critical element in the story is that after speaking the racial slur, the woman confronted Jesus. If the woman had simply written Jesus off as a loser, and had not

confronted Jesus, the story would have ended very differently. For Jesus to find his own healing, the woman had to confront him first.

In other words, Jesus's healing was contingent on the woman taking the time and making the effort to confront Jesus. In our modern world where racism and sexism still abound, this is called "making the victim do all the work". Think about it. Why should the woman - the injured party in this case - have to do the work to educate Jesus? And in our society today, it seems that (in general) white people expect black people to educate white people about racism. Men expect women to educate men about sexism. Sis people expect trans people to educate sis people about transphobia. And the list goes on. That doesn't seem very fair.

[image: national day for truth and reconciliation]

That imbalance was very well demonstrated with the lead up to Thursday, "Orange Shirt Day" and the celebration of our first ever "National Day for Truth and Reconciliation". Whether you followed the news, or social media, or conversations on the street. To me it felt like a real disconnect. We had indigenous people saying, "I have a story to share about residential schools". And we had non-indigenous people saying, "I don't know what to do". And substantially, both groups stayed in their own bubbles repeating their own mantras to people who already agreed with them.

That is not a ticket to reconciliation. That is a ticket to reinforcing existing barriers and differences. So how do we move forward? Where might we find healing? And by "healing" I mean healing for both sides! We need healing for indigenous Canadians, and we need healing for non-indigenous Canadians. There is no justice for one without justice for all.

[image: im-possible]

I believe that one model for moving forward is in fact in our reading from Mark today. Where the victim and the victimizer speak with each other. Where both parties feel free to speak their own truths even though those truths may be painful. Not only painful to hear, but painful even to speak. But notice that the interaction between Jesus and the woman was one-on-one. That is how we will move beyond division. One-on-one. Reconciliation can only happen in the context of having a relationship. And one-on-one

relationships can be very live-giving.

In the story of the woman and Jesus, I referred to them as “the victim” and “the victimizer”. But as we form our own one-on-one relationships we will find labels that work better for us. Or we may find we do not need labels at all. Sometimes the use of labels just creates additional barriers. We do not need to accept the labels that other people may choose to give us. Just be open to a new relationship between two human beings, and see where it takes you.

We have to stop expecting our government to solve this problem for us. We have to stop expecting the church to solve this problem for us. We have to get out there ourselves, meet people, and take the risk of sharing our truths with each other. When Jesus said, “the truth shall set you free” what do you think he meant?

If that sounds too threatening to you, perhaps instead take time to educate yourself about Canadian residential schools, so you will understand the wider conversation.

[image: trc closing]

In 2015 I travelled to Ottawa to march in the closing ceremonies of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And at that time, Canadians felt that they were not educated about the history of residential schools. The TRC led to a number of books, as well as a repository for stories hosted in Winnipeg. Since then, the history of residential schools has been added to school curricula, and in general, Canadians have been given many opportunities to educate themselves about this particular chapter in Canadian (and British) history. Educational activities like the “blanket exercise” show up all the time now. And today, ALL the major networks, TV stations, streaming services, etc curate materials about indigenous issues. Or visit your local library. They have great books to help you educate yourself. They also have free computer terminals with Internet access. Just go to YouTube and you will find tons of resources about Canadian residential schools and other issues that affect the relationships between Indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians.

[image: sea of orange]

So as I stand here in 2021, I want to declare that if anyone listening to me has not already educated yourself about residential schools, go do it. Perhaps in 2015 that was

hard to do. Today, it is very easy. But you might have to make the effort yourself.

If you read Snippets this week, you know that I offered to blend together 3 themes. The reading from Mark, the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, and World Communion Sunday. But this sermon is already pretty long.

[image: world]

So I just want to take a moment to life up the “World” aspect of World Communion Sunday. Residential Schools are a uniquely Canadian issue. But globally, indigenous issues in general are high-profile in at least 90 countries around the world. Colonization as practiced by the British Empire and other powers has led to a lot of abuses of indigenous populations around the world. Amy Hawkins succinctly put it this way, “The world is reaping the chaos the British Empire sowed. ... leaving behind a ruinous legacy for decades and generations to bleed. Those consequences are not just historical and buried in the past. They are still unfolding.”¹ Most of the world has suffered - and continues to suffer - from the impacts of colonization. And I invite us to remember that indigenous issues matter around the world. Communion is a symbol of building global community. Do we dare imagine that this applies to us?

[image: open your mind]

In closing, I invite each of us this week to look with open eyes and minds. To find a person who - like the Syro-Phoenician woman. A person who 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 the third thing I like about the story in Mark. 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 that story, Jesus helps a deaf person to open his ears. Learning to open you mind is contagious! If we care about helping our own community find healing, we just need to start. Caring for others is contageous! Perhaps we need to just take the first step.

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/9/26/hong-kong-kashmir-palestine-ruins-of-british-empire-on-fire>

I wish all of us a week of confrontation that helps us find healing.

Amen.