

September 27, 2009  
Mark 7:24-30  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## Open Mind

At the conference meeting this weekend, one of our speakers, had us do this exercise. Turn to your neighbor, and say, “We got issues.” We all got issues. He reminded us that we got issues - personally, in our families, and in our churches. It’s the human condition.

One of those issues is race. Often our children remind us of this issue. When our oldest daughter, Lauren, was three and four years old, we lived in graduate student housing at the School of Theology in Claremont, California. Lauren was one of only two Caucasian children living in the building. Many of the families were from other countries. Several were from Korea and the family who lived next door to us was from Nigeria. They had a daughter, Sandra, with whom Lauren played. One day Lauren came into the apartment, sat down, and said with a deep sigh, “I wish my skin was black like Sandra’s.” “Why is that,” I asked? “Because it’s so beautiful,” she replied. I agreed.

One of the things that struck me that day was how different Lauren’s experience was from my own growing up in Maine, where I had so little exposure to people of other cultures and races. My earliest memory of seeing people of another racial heritage is from blueberry season in Washington County. Each August we lived at my grandmother’s house in Harrington and worked on a family crew raking blueberries. As we drove around the blueberry barrens I would see many Wabanakis as they were working on commercial crews or staying at the migrant worker cabins. What I have come to realize looking back is that we never interacted directly. It was as if we came from different worlds. And, in fact, we did.

During my sabbatical time I decided to begin to make connections with Wabanaki people I had experienced as “other” as a child. I visited with members of the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribes. They were gracious and welcoming. They were also honest and pained. My visits with them reminded me of the complex, and often shameful, history between American indigenous people and European settlers.

Much of that history can be summed up in the blatantly racist signs, which have been part of our American history through the centuries, *No dogs or Indians allowed.*

Dog may be man’s best friend, but to call someone ‘a dog’ is no compliment. In fact, one insult used against a woman is to call her by the name of a female dog. We humans have an insidious propensity for identifying “the other,” for whatever reason we put them in “the other” category, as somehow sub-human, as no better than a mangy cur.

In today’s gospel story we can see that this insult is not new. It’s probably been around

for as long as dogs have been hanging out by human's fire circles. In this instance it is particularly disturbing because we find this "dog" reference on the lips of Jesus. When the Syrophenician woman, which means she is an "other" from the Jewish perspective, begs Jesus for help in healing her daughter he says,

*Let the children (meaning the Jews) be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs (meaning the Gentiles.)*

In his contemporary translation, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson puts it this way.

*Stand in line and take your turn. The children get fed first. If there's any left over, the dogs get it.*

To our twenty first century sensibilities the political incorrectness of Jesus' response to the woman takes our breath away. Did Jesus really say that? These are not the gentle words we have come to expect from the mouth of Jesus. So, what was his tone of voice? Was there a jesting quality to his words? I've come to think that reading scripture is like reading emails. You can't pick up the non-verbal cues and the other subtle contextual messages. So, we have many questions about what is going on behind, beneath, and between the words in this story.

Jesus was fully human, but his humanness is most unsettling in this encounter. That kind of humanness is not pretty. Some interpreters in struggling with this tension have suggested that Jesus' words were said tongue-in-cheek with a sly grin so the woman would know he really didn't mean it. Others have suggested he was testing her faith.

Maybe he just said it. Haven't we all said things we wish we could take back. The words rolled off our tongues before our brains and hearts were fully engaged and we find ourselves wishing we could stuff them back into our mouths. And it happens so often when we are tired.

The story begins by telling us that Jesus is exhausted. In the preceding verses he fed the five thousand, walked on water, and had a significant conversation with the scribes and Pharisees about purity traditions. That could do a person in. So Jesus went on retreat. He went to a house where he thought he could have some down time. But it was not to be.

It reminds me of that hour late in the afternoon, after a long day of busyness— getting the kids up and off to school, rushing to meet a deadline at work, having a working lunch, chauffeuring the kids to afternoon activities, throwing in a load of clothes and on and on... You've gotten home. The kids are fighting. You've gone to hide in a corner of the living room for a few moments of silence to pull yourself together. Suddenly you notice there is this unfamiliar kid, from the next block, whom you've seen but don't really know, in your house. She's down on her knees in front of you, begging you to make lasagna, from scratch, for her family for supper. Your jaw drops. I suspect some of us might even be tempted to let a few words slip before we caught our tongue.

So I suspect Jesus' words were tired words. And they were probably old words. Have you noticed that when we're tired and stressed we tend to fall back on custom, on tradition, on what we know? "It's always been this way." Some have suggested that what Jesus said expressed sentiments from Jewish wisdom literature. "I have to feed my own people first." In other words, it's like saying, "we have to take care of our own. Our priorities should be Midcoast Maine."

Maybe the sight of the woman on her knees begging, much like a dog does, brought the proverb to his mind. In his own spiritual journey Jesus had come to understand himself clearly as being called to be a shepherd to the lost sheep of Israel. That was plenty challenging. Maybe he thought it was enough of a calling, thank you very much. But this real, live, flesh, "other," who is desperately in need of his healing grace isn't about to let him off so easy. This woman has chutzpah. She is definitely an "other" from the Jewish perspective. She and Jesus are of different cultures, different genders, different faiths. Yet, she dares to speak to this Jewish teacher and healer. Whether she normally had such chutzpah or it's a result of her passion for her ill child, she meets Jesus toe to toe. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Jesus' mind is open. His mind expands. He is really listening to what she has to say. He's a good model here of how to lose an argument. He's gracious as he shifts his perceptions of the situation. Effectively, he says to her "Touché. You're right." Then, he says to her something that is not the standard response of "You're faith brings healing." Rather, he says, "For saying that" there is healing. This woman helps him to gain a deeper awareness of the universal character of his calling.

Sometimes it is "others," those people outside our usual routine and context, those of other tribes and races, those of other political and spiritual sensibilities, who have a lot to teach us about ourselves and our callings. We are so used to the voices and opinions of those close by, in our circle of friends, that we often don't really hear what's rolling off our own tongues when we're talking with them. Sometimes unexpected people show up at our door asking for the healing graces of Christ and we have to open our minds to truly listen to what they have to say.

Other times we have to seek out people from whom we have been separated by culture and custom, invite them to talk and then listen. This summer I took a small step in that direction for myself by visiting Wabanaki people here in Maine. Ron and I went to the Passamaquoddy Indian Township reservation in Princeton, Maine. The Passamaquoddy have been living in the St. Croix watershed for about 12,000 years. That opens my mind to a new way of thinking about who "discovered" America.

The woman we visited took us unexpectedly to meet one of the wise spiritual elders of the tribe, Joan. I am still trying to open my mind and my heart to all that this encounter embodied. It was a busy day for Joan. She was preparing to make her famous moose meat stew for the ceremonial canoe trip between the two reservations, which was happening that week. However, Joan took the time to sit down and talk with us about her life and her spiritual traditions and practices, both from her Catholic heritage and from her Passamaquoddy heritage. She spoke of the joys and deep pains in her journey.

Throughout, Joan talked about her visions. At one point I asked if she had always had visions. “No,” she said, “they started in 1965.” These visions frightened her so much she went to her priest. Graciously, he told her they were a blessing. This conversation with Joan was a rich interfaith dialogue, which was a mind and heart expanding experience for me.

In our rapidly intertwining world, where differing cultures are engaging one another everyday in deeper and deeper ways, where those who used to be seen as “other” for whatever reason are increasingly our siblings’ and our children’s partners. Our nieces and nephews and grandchildren have what we thought was “otherness” embedded in their very flesh and spirits. It is a new day calling for the kind of active listening, the ability to have a change of heart, the kind of expanding and expansive mission that we see in Jesus of Nazareth.

We got issues, but thank God we got Jesus.