

“God’s Rainbow of Humanity”

Mark 7.24–37

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 7 Sep 2003

Three of the world’s great religions – Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity – are spread far and wide because they are *universalizing* faiths. Unlike Judaism, Shinto, and the true practice of American Indian spirituality, which are generally *particularizing* faiths, the message of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity is considered to be equally applicable to people regardless of their cultural background. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country on the planet. Christianity, the world’s largest religion, is spread on every continent. There are more Presbyterians in South Korea than there are in the United States. And you only have to drive to Red Feather Lakes to visit the Great Stupa of the Dharmakaya, the largest Buddhist shrine in North America.

But, I don’t imagine that the universal tendency of Christianity came without a bit of a struggle in the early church, which, after all, was a Jewish splinter group. It was likely an evolution that came with some friction, not unlike the conflict many denominations today experience around inclusion of folks who aren’t straight.

So, the writer of Mark’s gospel with about 40 years of retrospect, tells us of Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophonecian woman, who was, of course a gentile. The story takes place in the region of Tyre, on the coast of what is now Lebanon. This determined woman is the descendant not of the Hebrew people of the 12 tribes of Israel, but of a Canaanite ethnic minority, despised by the Jews.

In some ways, it’s surprising that she bows down at Jesus’ feet; she obviously knows that something powerful can happen through his ministry. But for me, the real surprise comes next.

How would you expect Jesus to react to this woman’s request, which is not a plea for herself, but for her child? Perhaps with an encouragement or an embrace or even a healing?

Let me put it in contemporary terms. Imagine that a Roman Catholic priest is in an airport. A Baptist woman recognizes his collar and approaches him, asking for his prayers for her daughter, who is having cancer surgery at Children’s Hospital. How do you think the priest would react to a non-Catholic? Upon learning that she was a Baptist, would he say, “Let the children of the one true church be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and feed it to the dogs?” I cannot imagine any priest (or any clergyperson of any faith) doing that, and yet we have Jesus saying that “the bread of my ministry is for the children of Israel, not for you Syrophonecian dogs.”

It’s really harsh, isn’t it? I wonder whether Jesus himself was so adamantly opposed to inclusion of people from this different ethnic group. After all, he’s the guy who put the word “good” in front of Samaritan, when most of his countryman would rather have included the word “dead.” In John’s gospel, we certainly see the prejudices of the community of John sneaking into the text, as the writer reiterates the mistakes of “the Jews.” But, let’s just stay with the story a bit more.

The woman persists; she isn’t about to take no for an answer. So, she offers Jesus a retort: “even the dogs get to eat the crumbs under the table.” And then Jesus replies that for saying this, her daughter has been made well. Why? Because the woman is witty? I don’t think so. Rather, it is her persistent trust in Jesus and his ministry of healing. (What if all parents in our congregation were so adamant and ingenious about bringing the ministry of Jesus to their children!? Think about that, all of you fellow moms and dads: maybe the Syrophonecian woman should be our patron saint!) Trust and persistence

form the centerpiece of her faith, rather than belief in a certain creed or set of statements about who Jesus was.

Even so, Jesus doesn't say anything particularly encouraging, such as, "Your faith has made you well," or "Your sins are forgiven. Take your mat and walk." He says, "You may go – the demon has left your daughter." This is a difficult story: it seems even Jesus had some wisdom to acquire about the universal dimension of his ministry and message. I had the opportunity for some one-on-one time last week with Marcus Borg, a renowned New Testament scholar, and his interpretation is that this faithful woman helped raise Jesus' consciousness that his message would be received by all people.

Paul, writing in the decades after the crucifixion was able to claim, "In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female." Perhaps Jesus' consciousness and Paul's more cosmopolitan perspective left their positive imprint on the church, in claiming that the *way* of Jesus is for all people.

And we carry that notion even further today in the United Church, bringing that claim to life in our own time and place, as we state, "in Christ there is no gay or straight, black or white, rich or poor." This is the theological heart of who we are and an Open and Affirming church.

It is a principle that informs all the teaching of this congregation, whether in the classroom, the pulpit, or outside the walls of our church; namely, that no ethnic or linguistic group, no level of ability, no linguistic group, no sex or race or orientation will be excluded from the ministry of Jesus and the presence of the Christ in our midst. Hopefully, this is what every child and every adult experience here at Plymouth.

This is the good news: that God's healing love is not for some particular group – chosen or elect – but for all. God created each of us in the divine image, which must imply that if God had a body it would have infinite hues and shades. We are what Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls "God's Rainbow People."

Last April, Liz McGrew and I took our confirmation class to hear Desmond Tutu at Moby Arena, which was an awe-inspiring event. I was so glad for our young people to hear not just a brilliant Nobel laureate, but one of the most persuasive voices of progressive Protestantism in the world today. One of the assertions Tutu made that struck me most was his emphatic statement that God's love is for ***all!*** Jews and Christians: ***all!*** Black and white, yellow and brown (and even green, Jim): ***all!*** Straight, bi, and gay: ***all!*** This is the good news!

When you come forward to deposit your gift certificate for youth education, you will be underscoring ***your*** persistence to help the daughters and sons of this congregation, and when you look closely at this banner, you'll see a rich metaphor for God's rainbow of humanity here at Plymouth and throughout the world.

And when you come to the table, remember that the bread is for ***you*** and for ***all*** people. This is the open table of the kingdom of God; it is the welcome table for all God's people. ***This is the good news.***

Amen.