

**ALL ARE WELCOME**  
**Trinity United Church, Vernon**  
**Sunday, September 9, 2018**

Well, summer is basically over, and we have moved into fall. The last long weekend of the summer has come and gone. The days are shorter, the temperature cooler. The kids and teachers are back at school, and church activities are gearing up. This 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in September tends to mark the time when people begin that fall return to worship if they have taken a summer break. It also marks a time when newcomers may join the congregation in Sunday morning worship.

I don't know this Trinity congregation, so I may be off the mark here in assuming that Trinity is like most other congregations. But generally this Sunday in early September gives a congregation some special opportunities - to welcome back those we may not have seen for awhile, AND to welcome those who are new to the congregation. In the latter instance, if you're a newcomer to worship, you might also be a newcomer to town. Or you may have come from another church, or you may have had some disruption or loss recently, or you may simply have felt a tug from beyond impelling you to seek a spiritual home. Whatever the reason that brings you here today – whether a long-time or returning member, whether a newcomer or visitor, know that you are welcome here, for all are welcome in this place. As I said, I don't know this congregation, so hope I'm not speaking out of turn in voicing those sentiments.

So what does it mean “to welcome” or to be a “welcoming congregation”? Our scripture lessons this morning give us some hints. Think about several of the characters in our passages: the Gentile woman who begs Jesus to heal her sick daughter; the deaf man, again probably a Gentile, who is brought by friends to Jesus for healing; the poor person with dirty clothes who enters the church. What do these three individuals have in common? (excluded from the main stream, outsiders, rejected; probably not welcome in many circles.) Do you identify with any of them? I suspect that at some time or other, each of us has also felt excluded, not welcomed, as if we didn't belong somewhere – just like the Syrophoenician woman or the deaf mute or the poor man – although the reasons for our exclusion, our not being welcome, might be different.

If you listened closely, perhaps you were shocked by the account of the Syrophoenician woman. It's still early in Jesus' ministry as he makes his way from Galilee and heads west towards the region of Tyre, in what is modern-day Lebanon. It was a non-Jewish area even then. The text says that Jesus entered a house, hoping that no one would notice him. As usual when we are studying the scriptures, we're not sure if the account as it comes is exactly as it happened, but we can probably assume that something of this nature happened.

So Jesus is in Tyre and hopes no one will notice him. But a woman from the area, a Gentile or non-Jew, sees him and recognizes him as the healer others have been talking about. She runs to him, bows down, and begs him to heal her daughter and to cast out the demon that is making her either mentally or physically sick. (Remember at that time before we knew about bacteria, viruses, parasites and mental illness, demons were often thought to be the cause of sickness.) The account in Mark tells us that Jesus turns to this woman, perhaps with a look of contempt or frustration or weariness, and says, *“The children must be fed first. It’s not fair to take the food meant for the children and give it to the dogs.”* Huh? Jesus said that? What’s he saying? He’s telling her – in not very flattering terms – that his mission is to the children of Israel. He’s come to give spiritual food to his own people, to call his own Jewish brothers and sisters back to the way of God. That’s what he’s about, and he’s not wasting his time or his energy on outsiders and those who aren’t worthy of his message. According to the text, Jesus alludes to this woman as “a dog”, which was a slang expression of the day implying contempt for those unworthy, for those who don’t measure up.

The woman, whether you call her a pushy broad or a woman of great faith, has a wonderful retort, “but sir, even the dogs get the crumbs under the children’s table.” We don’t know whether Jesus laughs out loud or to himself, whether he feels sheepish or out-manoeuvred – we simply don’t know. But from what we can tell, this woman’s persistence or her quick wit or her utter belief in him – something about her and her response - changes Jesus. As best we can gather, this is when Jesus begins to see his ministry in a new light, and to include not only the children of Israel, his own people – but to extend that ministry to the Gentiles, those previously thought to be outside God’s love. Note that by including the Gentiles in his ministry, he is not excluding his own Jewish people. Rather he is crossing boundaries, drawing the circle wider so that more are welcomed, drawn in, indeed sought out by the love of the divine. According to the text, Jesus replies, *“because you said that, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”* She goes home and indeed it is as Jesus said.

What about the story of the deaf mute? On his way back to Galilee, Jesus takes a roundabout route through the region known as the Decapolis, an area on the eastern edge of Palestine. Basically it was a federation of 10 Greek cities established about four centuries earlier when Alexander the Great conquered Palestine, again a non-Jewish area. When Jesus gets there, “they” – the text doesn’t say who “they” are – but “they” bring a deaf man with a speech impediment to Jesus to be healed. Once more his reputation has preceded him. The account tells us that Jesus takes the man away from the crowd, puts his fingers in the man’s ears, touches his tongue – and prays *“that they may be opened.”* Then the one who could not speak plainly because he could not hear, now hears and speaks. The Gentile, the outsider, the one who would have been excluded by virtue of his disability alone – now he is healed. Now he is included, welcomed. Jesus reaches out to him, and “they” rejoice – “they” spread the word about Jesus and the presence of the holy at work in him, even though Jesus asks them not to.

Now these are both stories that speak of the healing power of Jesus – and some preachers might choose to concentrate on that part of the reading. But when we pair the passage from Mark’s gospel with the lectionary reading from the letter of James, what really stood out for me was the imperative not to draw boundaries, but to include everyone. In the days of the Bible, boundaries would primarily be ones of religion, gender, ethnicity, wealth and ritual impurity through illness or disability. Today we have other boundaries to add to those just named – skin colour, education level, sexual orientation and gender identity, social class.

In the letter from James, the writer takes some early Christians to task for showing partiality to the rich. Basically he says this: “you can’t call yourself a Christian and play favourites. Faith and favouritism are incompatible; they don’t go together.” He cites the example of a rich man who enters a church, and people fawn all over him. In contrast, a poor man in dirty clothes is shoved aside and excluded. Secondly, James tells his readers that faith and indifference are incompatible too. You can’t have faith, you can’t claim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and just mumble some pious words of benediction over the poor. Rather he says, “your faith has to be accompanied by concrete deeds and actions. If you don’t supply the needs of the poor and hungry, then what good is your faith?” For James, faith must also reach out to neighbour, just as God reaches out to us. In other words, we are called to actively welcome the one we might prefer to ignore; we are called to draw our circle wider, to live out our faith by including the one on the outside.

So let’s go back to the questions I asked a few minutes ago in light of these scripture passages: what does it mean “to welcome”? what does it mean to be a “welcoming congregation”? It’s about crossing boundaries; it’s about including those we might not otherwise include; it’s about being changed ourselves by an unexpected encounter; it’s about treating all the same – the wealthy and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, the healthy and the sick, the long-time member and the newcomer. Often it’s about moving beyond our comfort zone and into the unknown. I think most Christian congregations consider themselves to be welcoming and friendly. Certainly the United Church congregations with which I’m familiar would all describe themselves that way.

One of my favourite authors, Catholic priest and professor, Henri Nouwen, has some wonderful thoughts on what it is to be welcoming. Here’s some of what Nouwen has to say in his book Reaching Out:

“Christians are called to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings. Our vocation is to convert the enemy [his word] into a guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.”

Nouwen goes on to say that being welcoming, being hospitable is about far more than the usual connotation of “being nice, and serving coffee and tea.” To be welcoming is an attitude of the heart, a fundamental attitude towards our fellow human being. It’s about offering friendship without binding the other, and freedom without leaving the other alone. To welcome another is not a subtle invitation to adopt our way of doing things, nor to make our God and our way into the right way. Rather to welcome is to give others the opportunity to find their God and their way. Sometimes that’s hard and it causes conflict. And sometimes the newcomer, or the long-standing member will find the welcoming or the changes too dramatic or too challenging, and choose instead to leave the fellowship. That’s part of freedom too.

Welcoming is an inner event that cannot be manipulated, but instead must develop from within us. One of the highest forms of welcoming is listening to the other with real attention – stilling our mind and responses so that we can really hear and inwardly receive the other. Honest receptivity means inviting the other, the newcomer, one who’s a little bit different – inviting that person into our world on his or her terms, not on ours.

Here are a few other thoughts on welcoming and hospitality from Henri Nouwen:

“There are just as many ways to be Christian as there are Christians.... more important than the imposition of any doctrine or precoded idea is to offer [the stranger] the place where they can reveal their great human potentials to love, to give and to create, and where they can find the affirmation that gives them the courage to continue their search for faith without fear.... The essence of Christian spirituality is to receive our fellow human beings into our world without imposing our religious viewpoint, ideology or way of doing things on them as a condition for love, friendship and care.”

Nouwen goes on to say that such welcoming does not mean that we are bland nobodies. Rather real welcoming and hospitality is also to “confront” (that’s Nouwen’s word – to “confront” – “to confront the other with an unambiguous presence, not hiding ourselves behind neutrality, but showing our ideas, opinions and lifestyle clearly and distinctly.”

When I read words like Henri Nouwen’s or come across similar sentiments, I’m reminded that it can be really hard to be Christian – to reach out but to know where we stand, to be open to others and their viewpoints but to not to be blown about by the wind, to care for others unconditionally when our society and culture imposes so many boundaries. Yet we can draw heart and inspiration from the scriptures.

Jesus welcomed the Gentile woman, drew his circle wider to include her, healed her. He welcomed and healed the deaf mute and made it possible for him to belong. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to be like him – to welcome the other, to cross boundaries, to draw our circle wider to include all who want to be part of it. Like James the letter writer said, we are to treat all equally as God does, without showing partiality or favouritism. (There’s a whole other sermon on what is called “God’s preferential option for the poor” – but I’m not going to go there today!) Henri Nouwen says we are to welcome from within, to give the other space to be and to live from their centre, just as we are to live from our centre.

So on this day, I’m being presumptuous as visiting clergy, but to you I say, *“Welcome!* I invite you all to turn around and look at each other as we say that together, *“Welcome, welcome”*. And what a way to start this next church season!

And may it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.

James 2: 1-10, 14-17  
Mark 7: 24-37

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