

**A place at our table**  
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Sept. 6, 2009

Mark 7:24-37

You might remember that this is one of my least favorite stories from scripture. I actually got stuck with this story last year as well when the parallel passage in Matthew came up in the lectionary.

Here we have the story where Jesus is a jerk — where he essentially calls a woman a dog. Older commentaries would frequently try to mitigate the incident in order to defend Jesus' honor. They would claim that he used a diminutive form, more like “puppies.” Or that he was speaking with a twinkle in his eye. None of those explanations hold water for me, and it seems that modern commentators have gotten used to the idea that Jesus was, at that point, very much a product of his culture.

Within that cultural milieu, I learned an interesting tidbit about the Syrophonecian-Jewish rivalry. Apparently, the city-dwelling gentiles who lived on the shore controlled the trade routes that the Jewish Galileans living in the countryside depended on. The gentiles did not always deal fairly with the Jews. So we have a strange power dynamic in which the Jews felt both religious superiority and an economic resentment towards the Syrophonecians.

To me this raises an interesting question — what if Jesus' response to the woman carries some of this economic weight? Was he, a low-class country Jew, telling a member of the city's upper class to let him focus on his ministry to the poor? Does his cruel rebuke — comparing her to a dog — actually come from

this combination of religious empowerment and economic disempowerment? It can be startlingly easy to see the rich and the powerful as less-than-human.

Either way, Jesus quickly finds that responding to the woman through the use of stereotype was inadequate. Her snappy comeback opens his eyes to her humanity. If we presume this economic factor, then her response takes on a new layer of meaning. She asserts that even she has need of what Jesus has to offer. She even accepts Jesus' canine reference and asserts that even dogs get a bit of what the master offers.

Last time I preached this story, I took the perspective of the woman and explored her leap of faith in asserting her place at the table. It is easy to see our church playing this role. There are many ways for us to identify with the social outcast who is denied a voice, but who speaks up anyway.

For years now, we've been not only asking for a place at the table, we've been pulling up a chair and sitting down. And with this economic perspective, perhaps we have new ways to identify with her — we are city-dwellers, and many of us are relatively well-off. Members here have what we might consider “important” and “powerful” jobs.

Today I would ask if we can see ourselves on the flip-side of the equation. If we perceive ourselves as the outsiders trying to get in, doesn't that presume that we believe that there is a “true church” that we are somehow outside of? Or, at the very least, that there is a body at which we are not the center? I would argue to the contrary — that we are not on the fringes of the body of Christ, but that in many ways, we embody the heart of the Gospel. We should not simply be

asking for a seat at the big table — we should be opening up places at our banquet and inviting the rest of the church to taste what we've got because it is GOOD. Mercy, love, inclusiveness, peace, service and compassion are not peripheral to Jesus' mission; they are at its very core.

So how do we turn the tables and invite people to our feast? I think it is worth examining how we have listened to and engaged with people with whom we disagree. Personally, I have a lot of trouble getting past rhetoric so that I can truly hear what is behind the anti-inclusion faction of the church. I have a hard time getting down to the fear of disunity and unorthodoxy that leads to many of the closed doors we encounter.

To be sure, many people aren't willing or able to engage with us as equal conversation partners — there is only so much we can do. But have we done enough to share our encounter with the Spirit with those people that are willing to listen, even if they disagree with us? We cannot allow our experience of being ignored or abused to cause us to lose our voice.

How often has our conversation consisted primarily of self-defense? How often have we reverted to the same methods as the majority in citing particular Biblical passages that contradict their Biblical passages, and trotting out interpretive arguments that aren't convincing anyway because of differences in hermeneutical approach? What if instead we focused on testimony? What if, rather than responding to clobber texts with our own clobber texts, we gave witness to what the Spirit of God is doing among us? We've done a bit of this — I think our congregation's continued presence at Allegheny Conference meetings

had gone a long way to soften some people's thinking. And perhaps it sounds a bit Pollyannaish to claim that our story can have this kind of power, but I can testify that it was this type of engagement that led me to a place where I needed to work for inclusion in the church. I had learned the Biblical arguments on both sides; I prayed; I studied various interpretations; and I consulted with people I respected and trusted. But it was not until I had the opportunity to see same-gender couples who were full of the fruits of the Spirit that I could finally make the move to work for a welcoming church.

Part of my conviction is that churches need to do this work for themselves. They need to do the discernment and the study that this congregation did 25 years ago. But we can offer ourselves, our story and our very existence as a testament to the work God has done among us. Those things are offensive to some, but even they have something to gain by finding a place at our table. What can we do to open our doors a little wider so that the Spirit we have can go out, and the people we disagree with can come in?

At about 1:30 in the morning on Wednesday, after some six hours of open-mic testimony, the Goshen, Indiana, City Council voted 4-3 to reject an amendment to town anti-discrimination law that would have included sexual orientation and gender identity. This was the second reading of the bill — the first, several weeks earlier, had passed 4-3. Significant pressure from lobbying groups and constituents seems to have swayed one of the original co-sponsors of the bill, and he switched his vote.

What fascinates me about this incident is where the “yes” votes came from. Two of the three are Mennonites. And one of those in particular stands out to me — Everett Thomas, editor of “The Mennonite” magazine. This is the same Everett Thomas who wrote in June 2005 that the church should be grateful that the Mennonite Confession of Faith and our various polity documents gave us a clear framework for disciplining churches like Hyattsville. Here is someone that I have perceived as being antagonistic to our perspective within the denomination voting for something in the public square that I would ask for within the church.

The dichotomy in his thinking struck me as strange — why advocate for a greater level of inclusiveness in the public sphere than in your own church? Doesn't the church have a higher calling? I contacted Everett to see if I could get a clearer sense of his thinking. We had a very congenial conversation on Thursday afternoon. As I expected, there is plenty that I disagree about with Everett. There are fundamental assumptions about the nature of the church on which we do not agree. However, I found in Everett someone willing to take a stand for GLBT rights in this particular instance. I also found someone open and willing to talk about his position and listen to my questions. I believe that we need to thank Everett for his work for inclusion, but also challenge him to work towards a denomination where congregations can make the same type of decision that he hoped his city would make. We can learn from him, and he from us.

Back to the Gospel reading. What strikes me about this story is that Jesus and the woman ultimately recognize something of the Spirit within one another. Despite gender, class and religious difference, both encountered anew what God

was doing in the world — the woman found healing for her daughter, and Jesus learned that his work extended beyond the boundaries of his religious and ethnic tradition. In a way, he too found healing in the encounter.