

I begin by bringing you greetings from Nutana Park Mennonite. It is always a joy to worship with sibling congregations in MC Sask, but especially nice to be among the good people of Osler Mennonite this day. Patty is always bragging about Osler Mennonite—how you do this better than Nutana Park Mennonite, how you do that better than Nutana Park Mennonite—so it is time a came to see for myself. She dropped me off on the way to the nursing home in Rosthern where she is leading worship. I hope she remembers to pick me up. If not, it appears there is some nourishment on the Lenten table which could sustain the hungry and thirsty.

The topic I was given in this series on healing is God’s work of healing in MC Sask. Yes, the Annual Delegate Assembly was this past Friday-Saturday and a part of the conference proceedings recognized the grief a number of churches and individuals are feeling. Congregations have seen individuals withdraw their membership from the local body; hey, NPMC had one person do this and a few others ask hard questions. Congregations are being asked to learn again what it means to abide in love with those across the sanctuary aisle who carry a different opinion about biblical interpretation and Christian discipleship. The Area Church, as well, is grappling with this same tension of diversity within unity. The text I was given in relation to the topic is Mark 7.24-37. So let us get into it and see what guidance it might offer our congregations and conference. Follow along if you have access to a text.

In 7.24 we hear that Jesus has journeyed to the region of Tyre and Sidon, “a coastal area considered well outside the scope of Palestinian Jewish society” (Ched Meyers, *Say to this Mountain*, p. 82). Jesus went on a hot holiday to the Mediterranean Sea for some salt water therapy. He tucked himself into a sea side cottage to get some needed downtime. But rumor of God’s messenger who knocks down dividing walls (Eph 2.14) had spread. An unexpected visitor mightily tested the reputation of Jesus.

7.25 A lower class woman approached-- dividing wall number one. Any interaction between unfamiliar persons of the opposite sex would have been scandal according to the governing cultures of 1st century of Palestine (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p. 203). The male head of household should have been the one to approach Jesus. Remember the story from Mark 5 about Jairus the synagogue leader? He, not his wife, found Jesus to petition his assistance. In our story it is a woman, not a male figure, who sought out Jesus. Why? Was she a single parent, divorced, a widow? We do not know. Any of these classifications, though, would put her resoundingly in a lower class (Myers, *Say to this Mountain*, p. 84). Class and gender differences do divide.

7.26 The woman was a Greek—dividing wall number two. Jews and Greeks didn’t socialize, at all. Jesus reminded her of this by using a slang term (dog) in reference to her gentile ethnicity (7.27). References in Jewish literature (Taken from PhD Matthew Thiessen’s course on Mark at the STU January 2012) periodically use this derogatory designation. (Midrash *Exodus Rabbah* 9.2) “The ungodly are like dogs”. Deut 23.18—You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a male dog into the house of the Lord. 2nd Samuel 16.9—A servant of David asks, “Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king?” The text names her as Greek and Jesus reinforces this distinction with the condescending title of dog. Can it get much worse than this? Naturally! She asks for food.

7.27-28 Shared food is dividing wall number three. The Greek woman not only wanted an audience with Jesus the Jew, she wanted access to a table bedecked with ritually clean food. Granted she only asked for crumbs, but they were sanctified crumbs. A Rabbinical saying went like this: (*b. Hagigah* 13a) “As the sacred food was intended for men, but not for the dogs, the Torah

was intended to be given to the Chosen People, but not to the Gentiles”. To her credit, the unidentified woman only asked what had been offered to others.

I make this brash statement because the parallels between Mark 5.21-43 and today’s passage from Mark 7 are striking. The similarities are too significant to not impact our reading of today’s text. Similarities you say? Like what? Like the following... And if you are able compare this two texts as I list the common features.

1. In both stories a parent advocated for daughters threatened by forces of death. Jairus (5.22) in one case and a nameless woman in the other.
2. Both Jairus and the nameless woman fall at the feet of Jesus (*προσέπεσεν*) (5.22 & 5.25). It is the identical word in the Greek.
3. These stories are both episode one in a double healing set (5.24-34 & 7.31-37).
 - a. Jairus’ daughter is linked to the healing of a woman with a 12 year flow of blood.
 - b. The healing of a dog’s daughter is paired with the restoration of a deaf mute
4. Both sets of stories have assertive woman in a starring role (Woman with a 12 year flow of blood & the Greek dog). The granting of women these attributes would have been quite usual coming out of this culture (Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p. 199).
5. Aramaic does not often appear in the New Testament, but in both blocks of text a curative word Jesus uttered in the healing is an Aramaic phrase (see 5.41 & 7.34)
6. Both sets of stories include Jesus instructing (*διδασκεῖν*) people to not share news of the healing, and the word used for instruction is identical (5.43 & 7.36).
7. Both healed daughters get something to eat (5.43 & 7.28). Again, there is linguistic relationship between these words for eating. And on this theme...
8. Both doublets are subsequently followed by massive feeding stories (6.31-44 & 8.1-10)
 - a. The feeding of 5000 in chapter 6 to a Jewish audience and the
 - b. feeding of 4000 in chapter 8 to a Greek audience (Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p. 209).

This brief look at today’s Mark 7 passage, and its parallel episode earlier in the gospel, point to “lessons in inclusivity” (Phrasing comes from Ched Meyers, *Say to this Mountain*, p. 79). Dividing walls, to use the Pauline term, are smashed. Gentiles are fed in the same way as Jews. Women assert their equal place in the presence of Jesus. Class issues are challenged. The biblical trajectory of this story is seems clear even if not easy. Christ is to be centre of our lives, congregational bodies, and Area Church. To me this means that every person who confesses Jesus as Lord ought to have access to the divine bread entrusted to us. The nuances of this text even raise the possibility that the Greek woman doesn’t even know Jesus as Lord. In 7.28 she addresses Jesus as “κύριε”, which can mean “sir” as well as Lord (see translations of the Samaritan woman of John 4). In light of her Greek pedigree this might even be the preferred reading, but at the very least this story affirms that everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord has a place at Christ’s table among Christ’s people. The Greeks, the women, the poor, the ritually unclean, the dogs of our society have a legitimate claim to the bread of Christ. So, let us consider a few implications of this story in our context.

A personal application: Let us pray for our minds to be transformed. We are prone to judge, divide and categorize. Early letters to the church call for a change in thinking. In Romans 12.2 Paul wrote of our minds being renewed (be not conformed to this world but by the renewing of your minds). Philippians 2.5 echoes this sentiment—that we are to have the mind of Christ. And the great command invites us love God with our heart, soul and mind. These passages all suggest that we subordinate our personal opinions—our personal minds—so that the body with its various parts can remain unified in worship and service. Let us pray for a transformation of our minds which

can see the Kingdom of God bigger than those who think like me. Let us bless love our enemies (Matt 5.43). Let us bless those who curse us (Luke 6.28).

A congregational application: Every political or sociological or ethical position we hold needs to be subservient to our confession of Christ. Our congregations need to be safe places of worship for those who affiliate Conservative Party, Saskatchewan Party, the Liberal Party, the NDP, and even the beloved Green Party. Our houses of worship need to be welcoming places for those who sing four part harmony and those who can't carry a tune in a bucket. Our congregations and conference need to be an open place of belonging for those at different places in their understanding of same sex marriage. According to our story today, each of these gets fed from the table. If we struggle with this as individuals or congregations, see application one.

Congregational application two: Mission breaks down dividing walls. God's activity in the world has the power to draw our congregations together. We may squabble about Christology, but we can all say "amen" when we hear how Christ is changing lives. God is out there feeding Greek women and healing flows of blood, and we come together when we affirm this work of God through each other. For example, God is doing amazing things through you guys at Osler Mennonite, and I don't even know the half of it. I am aware of the Zachariases' volunteer hours with Mennonite Disaster Service. Because he is my ward councillor I know the faith filled systemic work Charlie Clark does in the city of Saskatoon. I see the produce from Pine View Farms, from Floating Gardens, from the Funk's bison ranch, from the Guenther carrot plantation and know you are on the cutting edge of food security issues. I know Mark Bigland Pritchard tirelessly serves the common good in the energy sector. I am aware of Joe Guenther and Glen Grismer's efforts to make Bethany Manor sustainable so it still exists when I am finally old enough to apply. I know the time Stephanie Siemen's volunteers with youth here and abroad. I know of Lynette Janzen's work at the nursing home. Etc... In worship we need to hear about the work of God in here (hold up the bible) and in our world. It gives us hope. It encourages us. It invigorates us for our on-going works of mercy during the week. We come together when we open ourselves to joy filled worship and testimonies of God's ministry among and through us. This is not a glossing over of our different understandings of Scripture, but rather recognizing that these differences are subservient to God's on-going work of salvation in our world. Worship, as platform and testimony of mission, is one anchor, I believe, which will keep persons united amidst our diversity.

Congregational application three (if time allows): Cultivation of relationships within the congregation will have the effect of breaking down dividing walls. We choose to sacrifice ourselves for the community, in part, when we have relationship with people. People put up with my wacky theology and moodiness because they know me. We have visited together, prayed together, played together, gone through stuff together. Fostering relationships within the community of faith, therefore, is critical. Games night does this. An intergenerational service project, like helping at Friendship Inn, does this. Raising money to help youth attend Mennonite World Conference does this. Being present at the Osler Winter Fest does this. These activities allow a faith community to know each other more deeply and create avenues of entry for new people to the congregation. Keep it up, I would say.

An application for the Area Church: If worship, mission and relationship help us respect each other in our congregations how much more so for our Area Church. This will mean pulpit exchanges, choir exchanges, inter-congregational potlucks, joint service projects and so forth.

More can and should be said about this story of a Syrophenician dog and its implication for our lives of faith, but it is probably more than enough for one Sunday. I close by giving thanks for the acceptance grace and mercy I have experienced from Jesus Christ and his church. I give thanks that he is the head of our body and has the power to break down the dividing walls between peoples. I give thanks for the church which, though flawed, still mediates something of God's divine spark. I give thanks for the bonds of friendship which link our two faith communities. Blessings and peace be upon you all. Amen

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(additional point if time allows)

A second application for the Area Church: It is particularly incumbent on those in positions of privilege to begin recognizing their privilege and create safe space for minority views. On whose behalf does our Syrophenician sister speak. "To whom does she speak? Who is her daughter?... Beginning to recognize privilege—although unsettling—is a necessary first step to overturning the systems and ideologies that marginalize" (Meyers, *Say to this Mountain*, 83-84). This story from Mark's gospel, the Jerusalem Council episode of Acts 15, and Paul's council to the Christians of Rome (ch 14) all underline the particular burden carried by those in the strongest position. So while a congregation like Nutana Park Mennonite has collectively discerned that we will support same sex couples, we must be sensitive to those of the congregation not at that place. And while a denomination like Mennonite Church Saskatchewan or Mennonite Church Canada is not at the place of formally blessing same sex couples, provision should be made for communities like Nutana Park Mennonite who are at a variant position. Congregationally or denominationally the "strong's" mindfulness of the "weak" allows the spirit to work non-violent discernment in our lives. There is a powerful story of this out of the book of *Acts* (Acts 5.33-40). Peter and John were imprisoned for teaching about Jesus, mysteriously liberated from jail by God, and re-arrested. Some in the Jewish high council were ready to these two apostles.

But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, 'Fellow-Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!' They were convinced by him, and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

This story points to the wisdom of patients. Why not allow God and the Spirit time to sort the wheat from the chaff. Maybe the majority opinion has it right. Maybe the minority opinion has it right. Such patience seems allows space for our Syrophenician sisters to be nourished, to speak, to be given space for discipleship which the Spirit may actually bless. And this, I think, is a good thing.