

“Hearts and Hands”  
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Mark 7:1-8,14-15, 21-23 Homily  
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For Private Distribution Only

This is sort of a difficult text for us to parse nowadays, I think. We mostly take for granted that people wash their hands before meals and after using the toilet. It may be a ritual of sorts, but there's nothing holy about it. We know how germs are spread and that this is the single most important thing we can do to keep one another healthy. We've even got pocket hand sanitizer these days! And so, from where we stand, it's even a little gross to think about Jesus and the disciples not washing before meals. It is, in fact, easy to take the Pharisees' perspective.

Well, it may be helpful for us to bear in mind that we're not talking about just any old hand washing here. This was a specially prescribed scrubbing all the way up to the elbows kind of “hand washing...” Another thing we might want to note is that this prescription didn't come from the scriptures. It wasn't one of the Ten Commandments or even part of the Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus. No, this was an extra rule tacked on by some Jews, probably the Pharisees themselves, who sought to illuminate the presence of God in their daily lives. Beyond that, it's been suggested that this may have been an urban tradition well known to Pharisees from Jerusalem, but not even on the radar screen in rural Galilee... And so it was, perhaps, more than a little unfair of the Pharisees to judge Jesus and his disciples on this basis. It really was a way of “lording it over” and putting a boundary between their clueless rural brethren and themselves. So much so that what the Pharisees may ultimately have intended to insinuate was that these Galileans belonged amongst the ritually impurest of all--the non-Jews, the gentiles... It's probably no coincidence that, in the Gospel of Mark, this passage falls immediately before Jesus encounters a gentile--a Syrophenician woman--in need of a miracle, who forces him to come to

grips with his own bias against gentiles and to begin to extend his ministry beyond his familiar Jewish circle...

“What does this text have to do with us?” you may well be asking. If Mark’s point was that we shouldn’t shut people out with exclusive doctrine, well, that doesn’t apply to our denomination. We are a theologically diverse, non-doctrinal church, after all. Not only that, but we are a denomination and a congregation that pride ourselves on a spirit of radical welcome and inclusivity. And, in a physical sense, we are a barrier free church. We have a wheelchair ramp and a lift; we have large print bulletins, hearing assistance devices and a hearing loop. Sometimes we even have American Sign Language interpretation. Truly, all are welcome here. We’re not the Pharisees in this story. We are definitely Jesus and his disciples after their encounter with the Syrophenician woman. Right?

The thing about barriers and boundaries is that they are truly in the eye—or the lens--of the beholder. Truth be told, we who have been active in this church for years may actually be at a bit of a disadvantage when it comes to spotting barriers. We’ve been doing things a certain way for a long time. We know them by heart, and we like them that way. We know our way around the building. We mostly know where to find things. And, in worship, we know how to do things.

Unless a new hymn gets thrown into the mix or something, we feel comfortable.

But now I’d like to ask you to switch lenses. Let’s put on the glasses of a newcomer and have a look around. Can we find the restrooms? The lift? Fellowship Hall? The nursery? Sunday school? Well, thanks to Troy and Bob, we now have signage pointing the way toward all of these things except Sunday school and the nursery... How about the worship service? Do we feel welcomed when we walk through the doors or during the greeting time, even when it goes on

forever? Or do we start to feel a little awkward and wish the service would hurry up and get started? Do we feel like we're at a disadvantage because everyone seems to know one another's names, and, except for a few familiar faces, we haven't got a clue? Do we know what we're supposed to be doing during the service and when? If we don't happen to know the words to the Lord's Prayer or the Gloria Patri, can we find them easily and join in with "the regulars?"

After worship, do we feel comfortable going to coffee hour? Does someone ask us to come, walk us downstairs, and introduce us around? Are we invited to sit at a table and, if we accept the invitation, are we included in the conversation in an intentional way? Or are we really just bystanders?

...For extroverts, these questions may seem silly or irrelevant. But for those of us who are introverted, these are the very things that keep us fearful about venturing into a new church and which may prevent us from ever returning to one that left us in the lurch. I know this firsthand. In my younger adult years I was one of those church-seekers who stumbled upon many a congregation where there was so little interaction in worship that it took a great deal of courage to venture down to coffee hour afterwards. And then it required even more guts to stay because so few people greeted me, and, frankly, standing alone with my cup of coffee, I didn't know quite what to do with myself. Perhaps you have some similar stories of your own to tell.

One rare exception to that rule was the Unitarian Universalist church I attended in Boulder for 5 years. There a gregarious woman named Barb was stationed at the front door to greet every single person who entered, to make sure everyone had a nametag, and to orient and introduce visitors to friendly people with whom they might have a thing or two in common. When I returned in subsequent weeks, Barb not only greeted me by name, but handed me a permanent

name tag. Needless to say, I was assimilated into that church almost immediately and joined shortly thereafter. I've often thought that every church should have its own Barb.

Now don't get me wrong. One of the things I've loved about this church from the very beginning is how friendly and warm you are. But the truth is, there's always something more we can do.

And the worst thing we can do is to become complacent. To put it bluntly, in these days when churchgoing is at an all time low, complacency is the kiss of death. As Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman teaches us, on the hospitality front, we all have room to grow. Even Jesus!

One part of our service I have wondered about from time to time is communion. It's lovely how we physically enact our sense of unity by forming a circle around the sanctuary, eating together, holding hands, and singing our grateful "alleluias" together. It's not just lovely. It's beautiful, and I've often seen individuals touched to the point of tears during those communal moments. In fact, three years ago the church profile listed this ritual as one of the congregation's three favorite things about this church. And I can certainly see why that is. I, too, love it.

And yet I sometimes can't help but wonder how this particular experience of communion feels for newcomers. I recently learned that one of our members has been actively inviting friends to church, but in the same breath warning them not to come on the first Sunday of the month. Seems a little counterintuitive, right? But he figures all the hand holding, touchy feely, circle stuff might scare them off. Those friends might also fall into a category I once did: For years after walking away from my Evangelical upbringing, I didn't take communion. I didn't know quite what I believed--where I stood with Jesus or the church--and I wanted to be respectful, so I abstained, rather than risk taking it in the "wrong spirit," whatever that might be. Consequently, I

would experience a wave of anxiety before communion services. How easy was it going to be to gracefully “bow out?” Would I stick out like a sore thumb? Or was it possible to be discreet? Usually I was able to pass the bread and the cups down the pew without a second glance. Or, when people went forward and quickly returned to the pews, I could simply remain there, pray on my own, and not raise too many eyebrows...

In our service, neither of these options is truly available. There’s no way to remain inconspicuously seated as the pews empty and a circle forms around you. The only way to “pass” is to either deftly jump up into the circle or to come through the line and somehow communicate, “No, thanks,” to the communion servers. Both options are awkward and probably not exactly conducive to a meditative, worshipful experience.

Not only this, but as we age as a congregation, it becomes increasingly difficult for everyone to come forward to receive communion. Sometimes people will take a double portion to share with those unable to come forward. Sometimes people will let Charlotte and me serve them in the pews. But not always. Like the newcomers, they don’t necessarily want to stick out either. Who really does, after all?

And so, as we move into our time of communion, I invite you to ponder whether, in the spirit of knocking down barriers to create an even more extravagant hospitality, you might be willing to consider adding to our repertoire some other ways of celebrating communion. Perhaps establishing a rotation that maintains the beloved circle, but not exclusively so? Or maybe you have some other ideas. My hope is that we can have a sacred conversation about this at our Semi-Annual Meeting later this month.

In the end in our hospitality we are perhaps a hybrid: a bit of Jesus and a bit of the Pharisees. We proclaim an open communion table, and that is, indeed, a beautiful thing. Can we honor Jesus and the gentile Syrophoneocian woman and make it more and more open still until the whole world would dine at our table or pray in our pews, if they could? Well, we can certainly try!

Amen.