

Expanding the Circle

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
August 14, 2011 at Peace United Church of Christ

In the movie *As Good As It Gets* actor Jack Nicholson plays Melvin Udall, an author who has written more than sixty romance novels. And when Melvin's not writing about love and romance, he's being a tad obsessive compulsive. For example, he doesn't touch other people even on busy city streets, and he eats every day at the same time at the same restaurant at the same table with the same waitress. Even then he brings his own disposable plastic utensils. The irony is, of course that while he is obsessed with purity, he is busy contaminating the world with his hostility and misanthropy. The epitome of a bigot, he insults everyone from his gay neighbor to the Jewish restaurant patrons who dare to sit at "his" table.

When Jesus was speaking in Matthew 15, I think he had the Melvin Udall's of the world in mind. While verses 10-20 were not included in today's lectionary selection, but let me read to you verse 10 from Eugene Patterson's translation *The Message*: *[Jesus] then called the crowd together and said, "Listen, and take this to heart. It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life, but what you vomit up."* And then to Peter Jesus says, "Are you being willfully stupid? Don't you know that anything that is swallowed works its way through the intestines and is finally defecated? But what comes out of the mouth gets its start in the heart. It's from the heart that we vomit up evil arguments, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, lies... That's what pollutes. Eating or not eating certain foods, washing or not washing your hands—that's neither here nor there."

Now it's important to remember as we go on with this story today that Jesus' religion was perceived to be built upon a foundation of purity laws. This is the idea that this thing or this person is not pure; this thing or this person is. Jesus says that's nonsense. He argues that following ritualistic protocol, going to church on Sundays, genuflecting in the end zone doesn't make us pure. Rather it is our behavior toward and words directed to others which determine our purity.

That's where today's lesson picks up when we are told that Jesus is taking a trip to Tyre and Sidon, which, by the way, are not pure places. These are not towns where you are going to be able to eat kosher or where good Jews live. In other words, Jesus is crossing the railroad tracks. In decades past it's where African-Americans lived. In some towns they still live there. In other places it's where the Hmong, Latinos and others have taken up residence. In upstate New York it's where the enlisted military personnel live. In Jesus' time it was where the goy lived. And Tyre and Sidon, well not only was it home to the goy, but it was the land of their ancient enemies the Caananites. And by the way, this is as far from Jerusalem as Jesus will ever travel.

Now after Jesus crossed the tracks he was accosted by a woman. The only thing worse than talking to an impure man would have been talking to an impure woman. And, not only is she an impure woman, but she had a child who was possessed by a demon. In other words, this woman was bad, bad news and "obviously" deserved her lot. So what does Jesus do? He ignores her. Interestingly, while she was a foreigner, she called Jesus the Son of David, a term of endearment for a Jew if there ever was one. In other words, she is not being caustic or confrontational, and yet Jesus ignored her. I bet you heard all about that story growing up in Sunday School, didn't you?

Now this impure woman isn't about to let that kind of slight deter her from her goal. She has a sick child and mothers of sick children are not easily deterred. So she starts in on the disciples and they eventually come to Jesus begging him to please do something with her. Jesus tells them that he doesn't have time for her because his hands are full dealing with the lost sheep of Israel. I can't help but wonder what the disciples were thinking. Ummm.. Jesus, I hate being rude and you are Lord and everything, but if you haven't noticed, there aren't any lost children of

Israel in this neck of the woods save for us and I'm not sure why were here in the first place... so can you help us out? But once again the the woman appears and this time she throws herself down on her knees in front of Jesus and calls him master. "Master help me!" Now Jesus is going to respond, right? Wrong. He calls her a dog. You heard me. If you don't believe me grab a Bible and look for yourself. He says, "It's not right to take food out of the mouth of children to give to the dogs." In other words it's not right to take energy and time that could be spent on Jewish individuals and spend it on a dog like you. She, however, doesn't miss a beat. She doesn't even argue with his description of her as a dog. She simply says, "But even dogs who beg get scraps from their master's table."

So what's going on here? More specifically, what's going on with Jesus? Honestly, I don't know. Scholars have spilled a lot of ink arguing and writing about Jesus' behavior and words here. Broadly speaking you've got two paths you can take. Path one: Jesus is not a bigot and he knew exactly what he was doing. This was a teaching moment; a natural learning opportunity for his disciples. Okay, but if that's the case then Jesus is terribly manipulative and cruel to a person had no clue that it was a teaching moment. It's not like he got together with her ahead of time and asked if he could treat her like a dog. Path two is this: Jesus was a bigot, at least temporarily. We are told in Scripture that Jesus grew in wisdom and maturity, and if Jesus was fully human, then he was formed in a particular culture with particular customs and particular prejudices. Of course most people reject this idea because they are uncomfortable with a prejudice Jesus. While I lean toward this interpretation myself, if he really did believe that he was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel, then why on God's earth did he take a field trip to Tyre and Sidon? I don't know, nor do I know how the Matthew may have manipulated or used the material for his own purposes.

Having said that, I also know that of all the gospels, Matthew is the most concerned with portraying a Jesus who is Jewish. And so it is all the more important that ever-so Jewish Matthew tells us that the ever-so Jewish Jesus expanded God's circle. Whether it was intentional or unintentional, I can't say. Perhaps at this moment, to quote scripture, Jesus grew in stature and wisdom and learned that he was NOT simply sent for the lost sheep of Israel. Or perhaps despite his Jewish and cultural upbringing, Jesus knew that mercy and compassion is to be extended to all people and that his disciples had to learn such a truth. But regardless as to the lesson plan's intentionality, Jesus' disciples learned something that day. They learned that their Lord and master would affirm an impure woman of another land and another religion as a woman of faith. Gone now are the words about dogs and instead he says to her, "O Woman, your faith is something else." And right then and there her daughter was made well.

Sadly some 2000 years have passed and we are still drawing our circles tighter; still obsessing over who is and isn't "saved" - whatever that means - and still arguing about who is and isn't outside of the circle. Yes the Caananites have been replaced with Muslims and others, but it's the same drama only with different actors. Regardless as to who they are, too often we still see dogs.

I remember the first time I was treated like a dog. The General Synod of the United Church of Christ had voted to affirm same-sex marriage. The delegates of that Synod, of which I was one, then went and visited each of the associations to share our experiences of what happened. I will never forget the ministers and spouses of the Eastern Virginia association who cussed me out. While they did not spit on me intentionally, they were so histrionic their spittle sprinkled my face as they vomited their hatred on me. And you know what? No one even asked how I voted. But it didn't matter. I was one of "those" people. The only thing missing that night were torches, pitchforks and nooses.

In contrast, the Western North Carolina association met at First Church Salisbury and while folks were very upset over the decision, those in attendance were both polite and respectful. I was

not interrupted, nor were assumptions made. I was not treated like a dog nor did they vomit on me and I'm grateful.

There's a lot of vomiting going on these days and now that the Iowa straw poll is over, it's only going to get worse. So in such a time, what word would I share with you today?

First, rituals - going to church, going through the motion of prayer, smiling in a church... none of that makes you a Christian. Who cares if you can name the day and hour when you accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior if you spend your days treating others like dogs. It's what comes out of our mouth and how we treat others that indicates whether we belong to Christ.

Second, religious leaders and people want to draw circles as to who's included and who's not included. But not Jesus. Name me one group that Jesus ever excluded. Name me one race, one nation that Jesus said, they have to stay outside the circle. Name me one time that Jesus made the circle smaller; just one he took seats away from the table. My friends, the United Church of Christ doesn't value inclusivity because it's the politically acceptable thing to do. We value inclusivity because Christ valued inclusivity. We emphasize radical hospitality because Christ practiced radical hospitality. We value this because we are people of the Way. This isn't something we created, it's something we were taught by the Son of God.

And sadly, despite that teaching, there are a lot of people out there who have been rejected by the Melvin Udall's of Christianity. Why have so many left the church? They were treated like dogs. And so they wander from this place to that, from this ideology to that spirituality to that new age fad. You want to grow a church? Start there. Start with those who have been treated like dogs and say "you belong at the table." You belong. You belong in the circle. There is a place at this table just for you. Amen.