

September 9th, 2018

Mark 7: 24 – 37

Rev. Sharon Smith

Hospitality and community: a practical dilemma.

It's when we try to live out our belief, that the difficulty sets in.
Even for Jesus (this God-man) that Mark is writing about.

Jesus has just confronted the Pharisees on their exclusionary practices.
Particularly the social rules that determined whether a person was clean or unclean.
- welcome or rejected.

Jesus declared everyone clean and worthy to be included at the table of God.

And now Mark writes the story, to move us from theory to practice.
From belief to action.
And it's when we try to live out our belief, that the difficulty sets in.

- Or in the words of Hamlet: Ay, there's the rub.

The narrative is introduced by words that highlight geography.
Jesus is going into unfamiliar territory, he travels with his disciples away from the centre of the Jewish nation.
And moves into the vicinity of Tyre and then onto the Decapolis.
Lands way beyond the horizons for a Palestinian Jew.

Tyre was known by the Jews as a Pagan city, it was occupied mostly by people from outside the Jewish faith (gentiles) from the Syria of the First Century World.
The Decapolis is quoted in first Century Jewish literature as being an Unclean place.
That says it all, doesn't it?

These are places where the practice of welcome becomes significantly challenging.
And it is here that Jesus' beliefs of inclusion and welcome are put to the test.

First, he meets a woman. A Greek, gentile, unnamed woman. In Matthew's version, she is called a Canaanite. In other words, a woman descended from the nation that Israel defeated to gain their promised land. She is an 'enemy' of Israel.

And in this moment, we see the tension of defined community and hospitality.
Jesus this God –man, a Jewish teacher enters a private home.
And suddenly, he is faced with the intrusion of a needy woman who is an enemy of Israel.

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Mark writes that Jesus harshly snubs the woman, and defends the collective honor of the Jewish nation.

Now for some Christians, Jesus is more God than man.

And we are faced with a dilemma of trying to understand how a human form of God could say words like this to another person.

Scholars who write from this perspective comment that Jesus mirrored to the disciples their exclusionary attitudes, or that Jesus intentionally opened up the space for this woman to express her faith. And that it was also an opportunity for Jesus to model humility, in the face of a shaming rebuke from this Gentile woman.

Other Christians, may embrace more of Jesus humanity. And see this encounter as a developmental moment in the life of Jesus. Jesus learning to put his beliefs into practice

Whichever way we seek to interpret the Event, Mark's account raises for us a human dilemma.

And it is this:

The action of offering Christ-like hospitality creates tension for community.

“Hospitality is dependent on defined boundaries and yet hospitality always presses toward an opening up.” *Christine Pohl, Making Room.*

We invite someone into something. That something, a community, is a place where belonging and friendship already exist. And the act of inviting someone in, challenges the sense of established belonging.

So we are caught in a dilemma...

We gather in this place to be nourished, to be transformed, to become Christ's body – a community.

AND

We are also called to invite others in.

In offering hospitality we live in the tension between

- the grand vision of God where this is always an open door,
- and our human limits, and our human needs.

Jesus, enters a private home. He does not want anyone to know he is there.

Was he tired? Was he just wanting to hang out with the folks he knew and loved?

Was he looking for rest and renewal? We don't know.

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Mark records a moment where the practice of hospitality rubs up against the limits of human capacity.

Consider this example from the book Making Room by Dr. Christine Pohl, Professor of Church and Society and Christian Ethics at Asbury Theological Seminary.

She describes a time in the life of her church community where they decided to make hospitality central to its identity and life. They welcomed many local people who were poor and homeless into their lives and into their worship.

They shared their homes, their church, their finances, meals, and energy.

They attempted to respond to every person's need.

She writes that it was an incredibly fruitful and blessed time.

But – here's the tension...

Within only a few years, the church itself had collapsed under the weight of the ministry, the leaders worn out from the unrelenting numbers of needy strangers, the parishioners became wary of any further commitment.

She says that they were unwilling to close the door, to tell anyone there was no room. Under the pressure of the needs of all the folks around them, they were not careful to nourish their own lives, or to put guidelines in place that made sure they had adequate rest and renewal.

Christ's vision of inclusion, welcome and hospitality is radical.

Have we thought about what it means to welcome others in?

The loss we may experience – opening of our circles, really opening them up.

Are we ready? Are we anchored?

Are we receiving the spiritual nourishment we need to build our capacity to welcome the stranger?

Are we being honest about our limits?

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We are limited by our bodies. We can only do so much, physically.

We are limited by our senses. We can see only so much, listen for only so long, without becoming overloaded.

We are limited emotionally. We can bear only so much pain and sorrow, absorb only so much hurt or abuse, directly or secondarily.

We are limited intellectually. We do not know everything.

We are limited personally. Each of us has a particular set of gifts, talents, and abilities, our own unique identity and integrity, but none of us has it all.

We are limited socially. We can engage in a finite number of relationships and only a few that are deeply intimate, mutual, and long-lasting. We are part of families, congregations, larger communities in which we have specific responsibilities.

We are limited spiritually. We are a part of the universe, but not the center of it.

Craig Rennobahm – Companioning the Stranger

In the Catholic Workers movement - there is an inbuilt conflict of how many guests you can take into the house. "One theory is that when a stranger comes to the door, its Christ, and you let him in. And the other theory is that if you're going to let Christ in, you don't want to have Christ sleep under the sink, and you don't want Christ to crowd out all the other Christ's that are already in there!"

"We cannot separate the goodness and the beauty of hospitality from its difficulty... in a paradoxical way, hospitality is simultaneously mundane and sturdy, mysterious and fragile." Christine Pohl "Making Room", pg 127.

Historically Christian hospitality...

- Involves a space into which people are welcomed
- A home, a household, a church.
-

And

Christian hospitality has traditionally also included thoughtful limit-setting.

- Communities struggle with boundaries and they struggle without them
- Ignoring limits can be a form of arrogance, a refusal to recognize our own finiteness.

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So what does this mean for us?

St Catherine's is a place of deep belonging, and historical friendship.
A wonderful space into which people can be welcomed.

And so, I wonder:

- if in addition to thinking through how we welcome our new Edgemont neighbours,
- we also need to be thinking through the vitality of our own lives of faith and how they sustain us.

So: let us think clearly. Discuss widely. Discern carefully. And act wisely.

Because moving from theory to practice.

From belief to action.

- is when the difficulty sets in.

Christ's vision of inclusion, welcome and hospitality is radical.

It will press against us. It will open us up and challenge us.

And it is absolutely, the way Jesus calls us to live.

Amen