

A Voice of Resistance  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, September 8, 2019

D Min Sermon  
Mark 7:24-30

On Thursday, I went to the Whitchurch-Stouffville Museum on Woodbine Avenue to look at artifacts from the 2003 Huron-Wendat archeological dig in Stouffville. A highlight of the exhibit is an interactive virtual display which allows you to walk into the Wendat site, down to the river, and through the Longhouse, where drying salmon hang from the ceiling, apples are piled into baskets, and smoke rises from firepits. There is a tall palisade fence surrounding the community. You hear voices, and birds, and the people occasional coughing because of the smoking firepits. There were 2,000 people living in community here for 20 years before they moved further north to the Georgian Bay area. I looked at beads and jewellery, clay pipes, and smooth rocks used as hammers. I left with a sense of calm and beauty.

Last week, the power fashion house Dior launched a video campaign for their men's cologne, Savage, starring Johnny Depp. We see Johnny Depp looking sultry and mysterious in an American Western setting. And all is good until we next see an Indigenous male dancer, in ceremonial dress of feathers and leather, twisting and twirling in his dance. Johnny Dep pulls back an aboriginal blanket and picks up an electric guitar which he starts to play. The male dancer twirls higher. Savage translates in English to wild, but also has a connotation of savage. The connection of the word savage with the Indigenous dancer jerks us back 200 years or more to ugly stereotyping. The public response to the ad was immediate outrage. The ad was pulled.

It reminded me of a song that my children would sing to the soundtrack of the 1995 Disney movie, Pocahontas. Here are some of the words of the song 'Savages', as the British commander speaks to his men about the Indians:

[Ratcliffe:] What can you expect  
From filthy little heathens?  
Here's what you get when races are diverse  
Their skin's a hellish red  
They're only good when dead  
They're vermin, as I said  
And worse

[Chorus:] They're savages! Savages!  
[Ratcliffe:] Barely even human  
[Chorus:] Savages! Savages!  
They're not like you and me.

This is almost 25 years ago.

Justice Harry Laforme is the only First Nation's person to ever be appointed a judge of any court in Canada. He has chaired two Royal Commissions on Aboriginal issues. He describes his take on the word 'savages': "Europeans classified themselves as "civilized" and Indigenous peoples as "savages." The assumption being that as savages "Indians" were at the bottom of human development."<sup>1</sup> To call a First Nations person a savage is a racial slur. It is demeaning. It perpetuates a dehumanizing stereotype that has been a part of our Western culture for generations.

Our Gospel text today finds Jesus making his way to Tyre, a good hike north of Jerusalem, and a Gentile region. He is headed there for a reprieve from the chaotic time that is behind him. If we look at what's happened to Jesus in Chapter 6 of Mark, it's been non-stop activities. He was rejected by his home town, his friend John the Baptist was beheaded. Jesus then tried to go to a deserted place but found himself feeding 5000 people with five loaves and two fish. He's just had an altercation with the Pharisees and the scribes about eating. He just wants to get away. Tyre seems like a good idea – not many Jews are there to recognize him. Just a few days of peace so that he can clear his mind.

But he is known even in foreign parts. And a woman, whom we are told is a Gentile, of Syrophenician birth, comes to him, bows down at his feet and asks him to cast a demon out from her daughter who is sick at home. The Matthew account of this same story adds a line here in his response to her request where he says: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel", meaning I was sent only to my people.

Then Jesus says to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus is saying that the children, who are the Jews, are to be fed first. It isn't fair to take the food from them and throw it to the dogs. The dogs mean her and everyone like her. The word dog was a derogatory insult, referencing the mangey, wild dogs that wandered the streets looking for food.

And here I push the pause button. What is this all about? Is Jesus really calling this woman a dog? I know he's called the scribes a 'brood of vipers' (Mt 23:33) but this is someone who has come to him for help. Do I say, well, he couldn't have meant it. How do I make it sound nicer? We want to explain it away to make it somehow ok. And in doing so we make Jesus look good, but then we leave the woman still standing there, labelled as a dog. The church has sailed past the awkwardness of this passage by finding all kinds of ways to sanitize the ugliness of this.

For example, William Barclay, in his 1975 biblical commentary on Mark, said about the dog comment, "[Jesus] did not use the usual word; he used a diminutive word which described, not the wild dogs of the streets, but the little pet lap-dogs of the house ... Jesus took the sting out of the word."<sup>2</sup> Barclay also decided that Jesus said the word dog, not as an insult, but in a tone of

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<sup>1</sup> Shelagh Rogers, Mike Degage, Glen Lowry, Sara Fryer, *Reconciliation & The Way Forward: Collected Essays & Personal Reflections*, (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2014), 64-65.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark Revised Edition*, (Toronto: G.R. Welch Co. Ltd., 1975), 179.

voice that was teasing: “We can call a man “an old rascal” in a voice of contempt or a voice of affection. Jesus’ tone took all the poison out of the word.”<sup>3</sup>

The Matthew version of this story tells us that the woman was a Canaanite from the region. So commentaries will point out the historical context where Canaanites were the despised enemies of the Jews. This animosity had been going on for hundreds and hundreds of years. If you turn to the Old Testament Book of Ezra 9:11-12 in the bible, you will read: “The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness... never seek their peace or prosperity.” These ‘peoples of the lands’ were the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, etc. So, then, we say that Jesus came by his words naturally because of this context.

The woman will respond to his words with her own, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Many pages have been written about this moment becoming the turning point in Jesus’ ministry when he realized in hearing her response, ‘even the dogs need the crumbs’, that his ministry and mission included all people, and not just the Jews. Every one who hungered for this bread from heaven was one of his. He never looked back from this moment but pressed forth eagerly and with purpose.

But what about her? It was her love for her daughter that drove her to seek this man who she knew would despise her because she was a Canaanite. It was this love for her daughter that found the words to ask for her daughter’s healing - yes, you can call me a dog but give me what I need. She knew that to get what she needed she had to put up with being called a dog.

Hers was a voice of resistance. A voice raised up against the culture that called her, and others like her, a dog.

We need to think about this. We can’t just whitewash it away. Being called a ‘dog’ hurts today just as much as it did then. Being called a dog today has exactly the same effect in demeaning someone’s ethnicity. Last year, American President Trump called former White House Aide Omarosa Newman a ‘dog’ on Twitter. The tweet ended with, “Good work by General Kelly for quickly firing that dog!”<sup>4</sup> Omarosa Newman is a black woman. When will we stop explaining away the hurt, the division caused by those who use their power and authority to undermine and humiliate people?

Cultural identity is at the heart of this text. But empathy is what moves us through the text. Empathy is what led Jesus to heal the woman’s daughter – which went against everything he had known in his culture, in his society, until that moment. She knelt there in her love for her daughter. He looked down at her. He thought of her words. Even the dogs can lick the crumbs under the table. The Bread of Heaven is more than this. The Bread of Heaven is freely given to all who ask.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/aug/14/donald-trump-on-omarosa-manigault-newman-good-work/>

I can't tell you what happened in his mind as he stood there, this woman kneeling at his feet, asking for healing for her daughter. I think he was overcome in that moment. But given the trajectory of his ministry after this day, Jesus let go of the 'dog' card and left it in the dust of the road behind him where it belonged. For his ministry would now include every person who came to him in love, regardless of culture, regardless of race, regardless of colour.

Dr. Frank Tomas writes that where there is no empathy, there are only winners and losers.<sup>5</sup> Empathy cuts through this dynamic, taking away the obstacles, the walls, rules, customs that divide us into two groups, those in the center and those at the margins, those who are higher and those who are lower. Empathy cuts through these identifiers and makes us all the same.

A commentary noted, "Just because we don't see how someone fits, does not mean that the person is to be ignored or forgotten or excluded – maybe we need him or her to reveal the way of God to us in this moment?"<sup>6</sup> The Syrophenician woman was such a person for Jesus on that day.

In the 1549 Anglican Book of Common Prayer, Thomas Cramner wrote these words that form the heart of its confessional statement, "We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy."

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. Cramner's inspiration for these lines was the Syrophenician woman.<sup>7</sup>

At the Last Supper, when Jesus sat at the table with his disciples, when he broke the bread and said, Take, eat, this is my body given for you, did he think of her? Did he think of the woman who said yes, I'll take the crumbs from under the table?

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life that has come down from heaven. The one who comes to me will never go hungry." (John 6:35)

*This is God's love,*  
not just for the Syrophenician woman  
but for every person he would meet.

*This is God's love,*  
not just for us sitting in these pews today  
but for all people, regardless of cultural identity, language, gender, skin colour.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Frank Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 57.

<sup>6</sup> Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible*, (New York: Maryknoll, 1994), 135.

<sup>7</sup> <https://kingsenglish.info/2011/09/02/the-crumbs-under-thy-table/>

The Bread of Heaven is abundantly given to all who are hungry.

“Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven,  
feed me till I want no more,  
feed me till I want no more.”<sup>8</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”, Voices United #651, Verse 2.