

Title: How Circles Expand  
Text: Mark 7: 24 – 30  
Date: Sept. 9, 2018

I sometimes put more thought than is called for in coming up with a good sermon title, so let me orient you to my title today: “How Circles Expand.” As we are launching our church program year, I am quite mindful of this sign behind me that boldly states: “We Choose Welcome.” We claim this to be a part of our DNA. Yet “choosing welcome,” is never a once and done deal. We must *always* be reflecting on what we are doing – both explicitly and implicitly – to draw the circle ever wider.

I think it is possible that we run the risk of presuming that once we have decided to be “inclusive” – whatever that might mean – that we believe ourselves to be on a path of steadily drawing the circle ever wider. In my mind I have the image of a balloon. As we blow our open-minded spirit into it, the balloon steadily and uniformly expands in all directions. Do you think that describes how it works in the church?

While that sounds lovely in theory, that is not the way I have seen it work in practice. Rather than a balloon steadily expanding in all directions, a different image comes to my mind. It seems to me that sometimes our efforts at expanding the circle looks more like someone trying to fight their way out of a paper bag. Rather than uniform growth, we instead view a bag being punched and prodded in seemingly random directions. There is energy in that bag, but sometimes we are not exactly sure what we are dealing with. What will become of us if that energy is let loose? This expansion doesn’t always seem like it is happening “decently, and in order.” We become nervous when the circle expands in ways that were not a part of our personal agenda.

I do indeed have some illustrations in mind that will hopefully make this more clear, but I rather think this is an opportune time to look again at this story we read from Mark a couple of minutes ago. I believe this story is more than relevant!

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The text begins by making it clear that Jesus was heading into “**the region of Tyre.**” Now I know what you are thinking. You are thinking, “Wouldn’t it be nice to have a Bible atlas in hand, and see where that is on a map!” Uncanny how I can read your mind.

Tyre is far north of Nazareth; and far, far north of Jerusalem. To be clear, Jesus left Galilee, and is now deep inside Gentile territory. On some level Mark is painting a picture of the trajectory of the Gospel growing ever wider. We like the sound of the circle expanding like that. Jesus gets points for being open-minded, and entering an area where sometimes violence had erupted against the Jews.

Jesus is outside of his cultural turf, and encounters a woman who is in the heart of her cultural turf. We are told that “**the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin.**” The Syrophenician part gives us clues as to her ethnicity (perhaps including her skin tone or accent), and the Gentile (literally Greek) part gives us clues as to her culture. We know that she was Hellenized; i.e., influenced by Greek culture. In any event, this woman would have been considered to be implicitly impure from a Jewish perspective, living outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, and a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. She is also a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, who initiates a conversation with a strange man. Another taboo transgressed.

We are told that this woman had a daughter who had an unclean spirit. When she heard of this Jesus the healer who had come to town, she immediately sought him out, bowed at his feet, and begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

I have to admit that at this point the story takes a turn that I find troubling. While we love the fact that Jesus was willing to travel outside his turf, his response to the woman throws us for a loop. He said 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.”** (v.27) Ouch!

Jesus’ response is harsh. How could he say such a thing? He appears to be quoting a bit of Jewish folk wisdom, but that does not lessen its sting. Did he just call that woman a dog? That certainly doesn’t sound very P.C.! In Matthew’s version of this same story he might have realized how offensive that sounded, and so he softened it a little bit with Jesus simply saying, **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”** (Matthew 15:24). To Jesus’ credit, he was clearly trying to think theologically about this mission. Jesus’ argument was not “no,” but “not yet.” In essence, stay in your lane.

We could easily imagine this Syrophoenician woman being outraged with this insult. Yet, in the spirit of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, she maintains her cool. This tenacious mother comes back at him with a clever response, **“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”** (v. 28)

Check my memory here, but I do believe that this is the only recorded incident of someone getting into a theological argument with Jesus . . . and winning! Jesus apparently is persuaded, for the account ends with Jesus speaking, **“For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.** So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.” (v. 29-30)

At this point many preachers might encourage you to be persistent in your prayer life. Hang in there, and if you have a persuasive argument, your child just might get healed.

My mind is going in a different direction. Did Jesus change his mind? Some interpreters propose that Jesus was just testing the woman to tease out her affirmation of faith. I rather wonder if what we are seeing here is a very human side of Jesus. Remember, the story started out with informing us that Jesus was exhausted, and really needed a break. We read, **“He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.”** (v. 24) Likewise, perhaps this very human Jesus was still growing in his understanding of the scope of his own mission. We cannot know exactly what he was thinking.

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Here, I think, is the message for us today. When we set out on a path of “choosing welcome” – a path that we believe to be reflective of God’s nature – we can never know the full implications of where this might lead. At the very minimum, it demands that we constantly be learning. And when I say learning, I don’t just mean “book learning.” I mean learning by hearing the stories of others. In particular, hearing the stories of those at the margins . . . like the Syrophoenician woman. When we truly and deeply hear the stories of those at the margins we are changed, and the circle expands.

Pat Farrell writes, **“There is important wisdom to be gleaned from those on the margins. Vulnerable human beings put us more in touch with the truth of our limited and messy human condition, marked as it is by fragility, incompleteness and inevitable struggle. The experience of God from that place is one of absolutely gratuitous mercy and empowering love. People on the margins, who are less able to and less invested in keeping up appearances, often have an uncanny ability to name things as they are. Standing with them can help situate us in the truth and helps keep us honest.”**

I was in Baltimore Presbytery during the years in which same-sex marriage was being debated. I have vivid memories of people lining up at two different microphones to debate. Those were challenging times for the church as the circle was in the process of expanding. But I have to tell you this: more minds were changed by truly hearing people's stories than by quoting scripture. It is not as though scripture no longer mattered, but that hearing people's stories helped us hear the words of scripture with new ears.

Beyond Baltimore Presbytery, as I think of how minds have been changed throughout the church in the world, it is hardly an even, uniform expansion. It is more like Truth trying to punch its way out of a paper bag.

When we say that "We Choose Welcome," it is *never* a once and done issue. We *always* need to hear new stories that stretch us in new ways. That is what we have in mind with the Adult Seminars over the next two weeks where we will be using More Light resources to help us expand our welcome when it comes to LGBTQ youth. What do *they* hear in the language and terminology that we use? As we listen to voices shared in a video format, how will that inform or transform our ability to hear voices from the margins here in Jefferson County?

There is no limit to voices from the margins that we need to hear. We need to hear the voices of refugees from Syria and El Salvador. We need to hear the voices of persecuted Rohingya, and out-of-work coal miners. We need to hear the voices of islanders whose homes are being consumed by the sea. We need to hear, and be transformed.

Good intentions are not enough. I knew of a pastor who was called to serve an urban church whose neighborhood was changing. Could he help them? He started by intentionally going around and knocking on doors. Slowly, over time, new families from the neighborhood started attending. Then slowly, over time, these new families were made to feel unwelcome in this congregation, and left.

Simply declaring that you welcome all is never enough. Hearing the voices from the margins is not enough if we remain unaffected and unchanged. Circles only expand uniformly in a physics lab. In real life they grow in fits and starts.

The Good News of the kin-dom of God is this: the circle *will* grow until love wins.

Amen.

### Mark 7: 24 – 30

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said 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." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.