

Coming Out From Under the Table

A sermon on Mark 7:24-37 by Nathan Nettleton, 9 September 2018

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Message

Jesus opens himself to the experience of those who are excluded and responds with a radical opening of the Table of God's communion.

Sermon

You have probably noticed how much Tara and Lydia enjoy playing hidey and chasey games under the table while we are eating supper on Sunday nights. Actually, this is a bit of a variation on an older tradition in our church. Back when she was about two, Acacia began the tradition of crawling in under the communion table during worship, and somehow it was passed on so that most of our children somewhere around the age of two or three have made a practice of going and sitting in that space under the communion table. Perhaps because of the age gap that occurred, Tara has been the first one not to pick up this tradition, but she has pursued a variation on it under the supper table.

Perhaps the scene in tonight's gospel reading might shed some light on the nature of this ritual game. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." I don't think that our kids have had to contend with any hungry dogs for space or crumbs under the table, but perhaps like the Syrophenician woman in the story, they have been claiming their place at the table in the only way they knew how.

Admission to the Table has been a big issue in the Church throughout its 2000 years of history. We have had many a dispute over who can and can't come to the Table. What preparation does a person have to do before being accepted at the Table? What initiation rites must they first undergo? How old must someone be before being welcomed to the Table? How much must they know and understand?

And then of course, the removal of one's right of access to the Table has been a major form of punishment in the church's disciplinary procedures. "Excommunication" it is called. It has usually been reserved for particularly serious sins or heresies, but there are lesser forms of "mild" excommunication too.

You may remember the Rainbow Sash movement and the controversies they caused in the Roman Catholic Church here in Australia when gay Catholic Christians presented themselves to receive communion from the Archbishop wearing rainbow sashes to identify themselves as gay and as challenging the Church's condemnation of their sexuality. While they were not officially excommunicated, the Archbishop ruled that they could not be served communion from the Table while they were wearing the sashes because the wearing of them was an open defiance of the church's teaching and thus ruled them out at that time.

Now this question of the rights and wrongs of Table fellowship is not a new issue created by the Church. It is older than the Church and, in fact, most cultures have fairly clear expectations of who can eat at the same table as who. Sharing a meal is and always has been a powerful symbol of acceptance and belonging and mutual respect, and limitations of who one can eat with have always been powerful markers of the boundaries between people.

So for the Jewish community in which Jesus belonged, the kosher food laws and the laws against eating with gentile people were crucial components of their endeavours to maintain a distinctive Jewish identity in the pluralistic Greco-roman world. So we Christians inherited that history and continued to understand the Table as an important place for defining who we are and how we are distinct and different from others.

And of course, once you define yourself thus, it is only a very short step to seeing yourself as superior to others and as belonging to God's favourites, and to seeing others as inferior and rejected by God and therefore to be shunned and avoided by us.

It is into just such a set of understandings that the Syrophenician woman in tonight's story speaks. She has come to Jesus, not seeking a meal, but seeking his help to heal her daughter, but because sharing food is such a major symbol of the boundaries that separated her as a gentile woman from him as a Jewish man, food quickly becomes the metaphor for the negotiation of their relationship. "Let the children be fed first," says Jesus, "for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

It sounds shockingly offensive to our ears, but it probably wouldn't have raised an eyebrow at the time. The understanding was that the gifts of God are for the chosen people of God and they are dishonoured if they are shared with those who are "not worthy", the outsiders, the excluded, the excommunicated.

Just what was going on for Jesus when he said this is impossible to be sure about. Did he have a bad day and a mindless moment and thoughtlessly repeat a common saying? Was he reflecting the racist assumptions that he had grown up with, and this is the moment when he recognises them and repents of them? Or was he playfully setting up a straw man and inviting the woman to knock it down with him so that all might see the world from a new perspective? It is impossible to be sure, and I don't want to dwell on the question tonight, although I have done when preaching on this passage in other years. I want to go in another direction with it this time around.

She answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." In that culture, the woman has taken a huge risk here. She is a gentile woman facing a Jewish male rabbi, and she dares to speak back to him, taking his own words and turning them back on him as she continues to call on him to do something he has already refused to do for her. And what she is doing with her daring back-chat, is suggesting that God's table is not really so closed, but that people like her, people long excluded, have a right to come to it and expect to be able to receive and eat and be satisfied.

And Jesus says to her, "Right you are, sister. And for saying that, what you were looking for has been given to you. Go home and you will find that your daughter is well."

We are understandably shocked at Jesus calling the woman a dog, but in his day, the big shock in the story would have been that this male Jewish rabbi would concede an argument to a presumptuous gentile woman, and that he would not only concede it, but commend her for it.

There are probably a number of implications we could draw from that, but let me just pick out one. Jesus is recognising, and so calling us as his followers to recognise, that we have much to learn from those who know the experience of being the excluded ones. It is crucial to our

understanding of Jesus that we see how fully he entered into the experience of the victims, the excluded, the outcast.

He died, an innocent victim, excluded and cast out. Only the victims can fully know what it means to be on the wrong end of the world's prejudices and hostilities and, having revealed how radically God identifies with that experience, Jesus calls us to follow him in opening ourselves to the insights and wisdom and spirituality that are only born in that experience.

Perhaps it is no accident that the very next story which we also heard in the reading tonight tells of Jesus healing a man who was deaf and dumb. We need to have our ears open so that we might hear what God would have us hear, and until we do, we have nothing to say, or at least nothing worth saying.

And so for us in the churches, we will be sure to miss the point if we argue and debate about the place of homosexual people at the Table of God's love without opening ourselves to real conversation with homosexual people and listening to the insights born of their experience of our exclusions and hostilities.

Similarly if we want to discuss reconciliation for indigenous peoples, we'd better not come with a colonialist mindset again and try to impose it; we'll need to listen and seek to understand from their experience.

And if we want to explore questions of our relationship to peoples of other faiths, we'll be talking in ignorant circles if we don't make friends with some Muslim or Hindu neighbours and listen and learn what it is like to be "other" in a country where being people of faith is normally assumed to mean Christian.

I could go on: asylum seekers, people with mental illnesses or physical disabilities, whoever. Jesus invites us to join him in allowing ourselves to be taught by those whose experience of policies of exclusion is as the excluded, not the excluders.

Perhaps as we learn from these various voices, we will begin to more fully and deeply understand what this woman asserted and what Jesus's subsequent response confirmed: that the Lord's Table, the cosmic banqueting table of God's love and mercy, is more radically open than we could ever imagine. It is so radically open that it will continue to shock us and bewilder us. It is so radically open that almost any time we think that we should be policing the boundaries and keeping someone away, we will almost certainly be wrong.

St Augustine warned that some in the Church, "intent on severe disciplinary precepts, admonish us to rebuke the restless and not to give what is holy to dogs, to consider a despiser of the church as a heathen, to cut off from the unified structure of the body the member who causes scandal. These may so disturb the peace of the church that they try prematurely to separate out the wheat from the chaff before the proper time, and blinded by this pretext, they themselves then become separated from the unity of Christ."

The scandalously open Table of the Lord is an enormous comfort whenever we have felt that we might be deserving of exclusion ourselves. God invites us, deserving or not, and welcomes us to feast on the bread of mercy and drink from the cup of love. But at other times it is just as much of a confronting and uncomfortable challenge, because God's reckless generosity

extends to people we don't like and don't trust, to people who offend us and seem to us beyond the pale and beyond hope. And I suspect that the only way to miss out on a place at God's Table is to refuse to be seated with the undeserving others at the Table. Of course, if we think we are deserving, we are probably deluding ourselves, and in truth, our right to be at the Table is no less a gift of far-reaching grace than theirs.

So, I don't want us to ever prevent our children from practicing their tradition of sitting under the Table, but I do want to say to them that they are not only allowed under the Table, but they are allowed to come out and stand at the Table alongside the rest of us. For what God wants to feed them on is not just the crumbs that fall from what is given to others.

God offers to them and to all of us, the deserving and the underserving, the understanding and the ignorant, young and old, straight and gay, local and foreigner; to all of us God offers and welcomes us to the full banquet of love and mercy and reconciliation and life. Come out from under the Table and feast!