

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
July 21, 2024 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Mark 7:24-30

Sermon: Turning the Corner 3 Connections

This week in our break your neck journey through the transition tasks of moving ministers, I will be sharing my reflections on the challenge of *forming connections*. Now when I was exploring this theme and looking for the image to post in our weekly email – all the pictures suggested by Google represented the connections and relationships that happen **within** the church. I agree, those are significant connections. They can be blessings and also they can be hard work at times. Most of the time we get along pretty well – if we are keeping a common vision and faith, at the centre of our community life it, helps, even when there are diverse ideas and approaches to how we will fulfill that vision.

But the transition task that is called connections in the work of interim ministry is not about our internal relationships. Instead, it's about our relationships with the community around us: the ones who walk their dogs past the building, the ones who drive by and stop at the fruit stand, the ones who kind of/maybe/sort of know where Rideau Park Church is? Didn't we vote there? Or is that the one by the fire station?

Assessing our connections reminded me of a survey that one of my colleagues was doing on Facebook a while ago, where she asked 3 questions:

1. Do people KNOW ABOUT your congregation in the community? She asked, and
2. What do people KNOW ABOUT your congregation in the community? also
3. What is your congregation KNOWN FOR in the community?

I'm going to invite you to answer those questions with me.

I'm coming down to hear what you have to say, and then I'll say it into the sound system so folks online can hear.

1. Do you think people know about Rideau Park in the community? Alta Vista neighbourhood? Beyond?
Yes, the people in the neighbourhood know it. Beyond the neighbourhood we are known by the music/bell community, the Region, various groups that use the facility.
2. What do people in our community know about Rideau Park? Or HOW do they know about Rideau Park?
Again, music, scouting, guiding, AA, Christmas Cheer.

3. What is your congregation best known for in the community? *A busy place, children and youth are welcomed, Christmas pageant, spirituality, generosity.*

In the gospels, we are quite accustomed to reading stories about Jesus reaching outside the inner circle of established religion, about Jesus challenging the prejudices people have about ethnicity, gender identity, marital status, ability and disability and illness, and of course, morality.

This morning however, we heard a story where **Jesus** is the one being challenged. I have said for many years that this is one of my favourite Bible stories. In my college days this story was commonly referred to as “Jesus and the Uppity Woman” as if the woman in the story is somehow wrong to challenge Jesus’ over his strict guidelines about salvation. That was several decades ago and I was a bit uppity myself when it came to sexual discrimination!

NOW it is called the Syro-phoenician Woman, which tells us the more significant fact - that the woman’s origins were gentile. Certainly she was not Jewish, Samaritan or Galilean – those were the groups that Jesus usually interacted with.

This gentile woman had a daughter who was ill, and diagnosed by the gospel writer as having a demon. Perhaps it was mental illness, or maybe some terrible pain or disability that was made her act in a violent or unpredictable way. In those times, if they couldn’t see the cause of an illness outside the body, like an injury or wound or swelling, they usually called it possession by a demon.

Tyre, where the gentile woman and her daughter lived, was in the northern region, it bordered on northern Galilee, in what today is Lebanon. It also harboured on the Mediterranean Sea and so shipping trade routes brought people of many different cultures together in that place. So it was no offense to that gentile woman to call on this Jewish Jesus when her daughter needed him.

But it was an offense to Jesus, or so it seems. His salvation story and identity were so deeply rooted in the story of God’s Jewish people; his ministry, defiance of authorities and spirituality were all Jewish in origin. Now here is a gentile – and a woman – who dared to ask for his help. No wonder they called her uppity!

When Jesus tried to explain this to her, he even referred to her people as dogs. However, she turned the tables on him. “Yet even the dogs get to eat the crumbs under the table” she replied. Her belief in her daughter’s right to healing was so strong that she believed even the crumbs or the leftovers of God’s grace would be powerful to heal that demon.

And Jesus was astonished. Her faith was so strong, how could God even impose boundaries on this story of salvation? As we have seen throughout the gospels, Jesus then continued to be just as provocative as she had been. To break down the barriers, to open the circle and to offer that salvation to every one.

Some interpreters say he planned the whole encounter that way, as a teachable moment. We don't really know...

But we do know it had a ripple effect throughout the gospel and into the acts of the apostles, all through Paul's epistles and the chronicles of the early church. Draw the circle wide, they sang, now draw it wider still.

And yet... if you ask people in the wider community what a church is – what they see instead is the building with walls and doorways, they perceive closed membership, membership ritual, secret signs and practices. They might hear and admire a church's internal connections – but not many of them feel that they could or would want to belong.

I think that Rideau Park is very visible in the wider community – for many of the reasons you brought up today. And I'll tell you this story: one time a member of our congregation told me about a church they attended elsewhere – the music was great, the preacher was phenomenal,... yadda, yadda yadda – I confess, I was a little jealous!

So I googled that church – and I read the Google reviews: beautiful architecture, stained glass windows, fantastic organ and choir – most people had been there for a wedding or concert, not so much worship or programming.

Then I googled Rideau Park – and I read these reviews:

- A warm welcoming church. Helpful, caring, non judgemental. Beautiful inside. Cares about the community.
- this church is connected and up-to-date
- There is always something going on. Always well run and organized. The volunteers are friendly, welcoming, and smiling.
- One of the most warmest, welcoming churches I've ever been to. They genuinely care about ppl and the community.
- We were warmly welcomed and is nice to see a church that is moving ahead in these difficult times.
- I love how churches respond to the needs of their communities and Rideau Park does just that!
- A welcoming church for all faiths and all colours of skin, all life styles. LGBTQ all welcome.

Only one of the reviews came from someone I know from our congregation – thanks!

And there was, of course, one negative review:

- Just another one of Ottawa's apostate "churches" with unbiblical morality and teaching a false God.

Which, when you think about it is kind of a compliment too – though I am sure it wasn't intended that way!

So... Do people KNOW ABOUT your congregation in the community? Yes! What is your congregation KNOWN FOR?

I like to think we are known for our welcome, our community partnerships, our inclusivity, our spirituality and our love – and that hope seems to be true most of the time, at least according to Google.

Sometimes people come to Rideau Park for worship or a program or an event, and they get a surprise. This worshipping community is not the stereotype of church they grew up with – in fact, very few United Churches are. Following Jesus, I like to think that we are continually pushing the boundaries of people's expectations of what a faith community is for, and what it can do, not just for its members but for the community beyond our walls.

We are making room for God's story of salvation to flow through us into the world.

Thanks be to God!