

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
September 9, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Mark 7:24-30

Sermon: Changing Hearts and Minds (Open House Sunday)

I love reading biographies, autobiographies and memoirs. And I have been reading a great one these last few weeks. It is called “Whenever you’re ready,” by Shawn deSouza-coelho. It’s actually based on the work of Nora Polley, who was a stage manager at the Stratford Festival over a couple of decades. So you can only imagine the complications of that kind of work. She was managing stage sets and actors, cuing lights and prompting frozen dialogues. She had to manage to get everything on and off stage at just the right time, from cars to live animals, babies and seniors, motorcycles and swingsets. She dealt with actors and directors who could be egotistical, addicted or riddled with stage fright – sometimes with three or four shows taking place around the same time.

I admit sometimes I feel like we have a three ring circus at church on Sunday morning, when we have one of those services with all the bells and whistles. But I was humbled by all the balls in the air she had to juggle for the theatre at Stratford.

Still, there was this one story she told – it was a story about a memorial service for someone – I can’t remember if it was her own father or someone from Stratford. Being the stage manager extraordinaire, she was invited to help organize the service, as I think she had done a number of times. But this service was being held at a church, an Anglican church, and not at the theatre.

So Nora was trying to stage manage the funeral, while the Anglican minister was trying to do whatever it is we ministers do, maybe you could call it “make arrangements’ or lead worship. He was obviously trying to do things the way he was used to doing things. And so was Nora. So in the book she said some rather unflattering things about that minister “butting in” until she “put him in his place” and “let him know where things stood.”

I’ve got to tell you, I side with the minister. They were on his turf and, granted, the Anglicans have more traditions than we do, but it’s not easy to give up your turf, your traditional understanding of why you are there and what might be meaningful to the congregation. It is also hard to put your own ego aside and let some “uppity woman” push you around.

The gospel story we have heard today has often been labelled the story of Jesus and that “uppity woman”. That’s what I have always called it. At first it was because I was shocked and appalled at someone who had the nerve to question the Son of God. And later on, it was because it gave me a little thrill to think it was a mere woman who had the courage (or the desperation) to challenge Jesus into changing his mind.

This woman was not like most of the woman Jesus would have known. No, this particular “uppity woman” breaks through every traditional barrier that should have

prevented her from approaching Jesus in the first place. She was “a Gentile, a person of Syrophoenician origin” – outside the traditional boundaries of Israel. In other words, in the understanding of that time and culture, she would have been impure, one who dwelt outside both the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses.. She was descended of ancient enemies of Israel. On top of that, she was also a woman, apparently unaccompanied by a husband or male relative.

All of that makes it quite shocking, and very pushy of her to initiate a conversation with a strange man.

But maybe she was just desperate enough to push through the conventions of polite behaviour. We are told that her daughter was possessed by a demon. Although we are not told exactly how the demon affected her daughter, we can probably guess from other stories about demon-possessed people that it made her act in bizarre and anti-social ways. This woman and her daughter were not the kind of family most people would be likely to invite over for dinner, even within her own ethnic or religious group.

So any way you look at it, this woman was an outsider. For her to approach Jesus was pretty uppity for someone so downtrodden. And Jesus actually had the nerve to say as much to her face. When the woman fell at his feet and begged him to heal her daughter, Jesus quoted the traditional teaching, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” The “children” in this statement were the children of Israel, the “little dogs” (*kunaria*) were understood to be everyone else, everyone outside God’s covenant with Israel, all other peoples.

Jesus’ response was harsh, and we aren’t used to hearing harsh words coming out of his mouth. How could he say such a thing? Was he testing her? Was this meant to be a teachable moment? Was he using reverse psychology?

Some interpreters propose that Jesus said it to tease out her faith in God. Others say that here we see the very human side of Jesus, exhausted and needing a break, or perhaps not yet understanding the scope of his own mission.

While we cannot know exactly what Jesus was thinking, it is clear that when approached by the Syrophoenician woman, Jesus’ immediate response is to point out the limits of his mission, his call to serve his own people.

But this tenacious mother came back at him with a clever response, “Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs”. Jesus could only agree. “For saying that, you may go,” Jesus said. “The demon has left your daughter”. Jesus could only agree that God’s love and healing power is so great that even just a crumb is enough to cast out a terrible demon. God’s love, therefore, knows no ethnic, political, or social boundaries. And the gospel tells us “So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.”

The daughter was healed, and perhaps Jesus was also – healed of the kind of terrible tunnel vision that sometimes narrows the call of the gospel. That uppity pushy desperate mother “stage-managed” a revolution in the thinking of God’s people, even in

the thinking of God's only begotten. She helped him to change his heart and his mind about the limits of God's love.

So there will be times when "outsiders" push us beyond our comfort zones. There will be times when they see the open door of a church and come indoors, bringing with them a revolution of new ideas and demands and hopes. The question is are we ready to have our hearts and our minds, our traditions and our conventions, changed by their presence in our midst.

Today is a special day for welcoming. Not just welcoming back, though that is true as well. But also, in a more challenging way, to welcome the newcomer and be changed by them.

There is an image that is often used in talking about church outreach. Most churches believe that they are welcoming, friendly places. That is because the ones who have been there a long time are welcome, and often surrounded by friends. It's hard then to put ourselves in the shoes of someone who walks in the door the first time, who doesn't already have a friend here to welcome them.

So often we hear the image of church outreach as welcoming a guest into your home. Make eye contact, be interested, invite them back. But when we welcome a newcomer to church what we really need to imagine is not a guest, but a new roommate, or landlord. Invite someone in, and then let them rearrange the furniture, or cook in your kitchen, or reset the thermostat, or dig up your flowerbed. Sounds pushy doesn't it? What kind of uppity person would expect such a free hand in someone else's home?

Oh, wait a minute. Maybe the uppity guest, the pushy roommate is the one God has sent – the prophet who comes to transform our hearts and minds. The one whose real need demonstrates just how powerful God can be.

Let us open house after the service today. But always remembering whose house this is. And that the doors open both ways.

Let us be in the world, and be changed. Thanks be to God.