Nu'uanu Congregational Church

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 5, 2021

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REACHING OUT Mark 7:24–37

Let us join our hearts in prayer: O God, may the words of my lips in the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

Good morning everyone and may God’s grace and peace rest upon us.

Some of you may know that Henri Nouwen is one of my favorite writers on the theme of the spiritual life. Years ago,

his book *“Reaching Out”* captured my imagination. This little book describes three movements of the spiritual life: the movement from loneliness to solitude, the movement from hostility to hospitality, and the movement from illusion to prayer.

I wish to speak today of the second of the three movements: the movement from hostility to hospitality. I do so for two reasons: first, because the story of Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman has led me to do so, and secondly, because of the rising incidents of open hostility taking place in our world. Daily, we are bombarded by images of hostility in the life of our world—airplane passengers attacking flight attendants who try to impose mask wearing mandates; an angry crowd shouting anti-vaccine and anti-Semitic rhetoric outside the home of Hawai'i’s Lieutenant Governor; vicious shouting matches between pro-government and anti-government protesters; and most notably, the violent January 6th attack on the U.S. Congress. Everywhere we see a rise in open hostility between people.

Such hostility 0ften arises from feelings of hurt, abandonment and fear and competitiveness often hidden from view. Henri Nouwen in his little book describes this as back-stage hostility. To describe the presence of back-stage hostility in our lives, Nouwen reports a conversation he once had with a professional actor. The actor said that oftentimes he and his fellow actors were so fearful about their chances of “making it” in the world of theatre that the spirit of competition often turned into an open hostility towards each other. The actor said that on stage the actors rehearsed the “most moving scenes of love, tenderness and intimate relationships,” but when the footlights dimmed the scene back-stage was one filled with hatred, harshness and mutual suspicion.

Let’s admit that this illustration from the world of theatre can describe what can easily take place in many churches. On stage, Christians speak of their love for God and their love for one another, while off-stage, behind the scenes, they are filled with suspicion, enmity, and even hostility towards one another. On stage, they put on “happy faces” and greet each other warmly, but underneath their warm embraces feelings of hurt and distrust persist.

In church life, in the life of our families, as in life itself, it seems to be so difficult to speak openly about our failings to be the loving people God has created us to be. Nor do we acknowledge, sometimes even to ourselves, the feelings of distrust and hostility we harbor towards one another.

What to do? Let’s look at the scripture reading for today from the Gospel of Mark to see if it might shed some light on our subject. This story from the 7th chapter of Mark is a remarkable passage in so many ways. For one thing, it displays a human side of Jesus we do not often see. Let’s set the scene. Jesus enters the Gentile region of Tyre, a region in the north of Palestine. A Gentile woman, a Greek, a Syrophoenician by birth, approaches him. She asks him to heal her daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit. At first, Jesus refuses. Towards the woman he displays the typical back-stage hostility Jews held against Gentiles in his day. Besides, his mission, at least for now, is not to reach out to Gentiles. His mission is to the lost sheep of Israel.

He is clearly irritated by this woman. Jesus has come to Tyre in order to get away from it all. Perhaps he just wanted to reflect and pray. We read, “He didn’t want anyone to know that he had entered a house, but he couldn’t hide.” The Gentile woman learned where he was and boldly intrudes into his space. She defies all the social rules of Jesus’s day. Jews were to have nothing to do with Gentiles. Men were not to have any interaction with women in public. But there is no shame in this woman. She wants healing for her daughter, and she has faith that Jesus can bring it about.

Jesus’s words directed towards the woman are startling. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” In these words, Jesus reflects his own Jewish culture. Jewish writers often referred to Gentiles as dogs, as racist as that may seem to us. In saying that it isn’t right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs, Jesus is saying in no uncertain terms that the Gospel, the Good News of God’s Kingdom (the children’s bread) is not to be offered to Gentiles (the dogs) but to the people of Israel.

The woman will not be deterred from her own mission. Using her unusual wit and *hutzpah* she replies, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In other words, “even if you call us dogs, Jesus, the Good News is for us, too!”

Jesus replies: “For saying that you may go—the demon has left your daughter.“ When the woman returned home, she found her child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

Let us reflect on what happened here. The woman could have responded to Jesus’s words in a hostile manner. She could have expressed her anger, leaving the encounter disillusioned and defeated. She would then have harbored her resentment for a very long time, and who knows how that resentment might have issued forth in open hostility. But she did not respond in an all-too-human fashion. Instead, she employed her wit and her faith to defuse the situation. By these, she broke through the ancient hostility between Jews and Gentiles. She changed Jesus. Let me say that again. *She actually changed Jesus.* From now on, Jesus will extend the Good News of the Gospel to both Jew and Gentile. This new aspect of Jesus’s ministry and mission is confirmed as he heals yet another Gentile, the man who was deaf.

Jesus, disarmed by the wit of the Syrophoenician woman, recognized her faith, and it was her faith that created the open space between them where healing and reconciliation could take place. Even those with whom we have deep-seated differences have faith as strong or as weak as our own. It is our shared faith that can create the healing space we need and allow hospitality to arise from hostility.

Henri Nouwen writes the following:

Hospitality means primarily the creation of free

space where the stranger can enter and become a

friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to

change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and

women over to our side, but to offer freedom not

disturbed by dividing lines.

My friends: yes, it’s true. There is far too much hostility and enmity in our world. And it’s also true that we may not be able to do much about it on a large scale. But what the Gospel asks us to do is to practice hospitality in our own life circle and reach out to those whom we perceive as different and perhaps even unredeemable. We can create that open and free space between ourselves and others in which we can recognize that we have so much more in common with others than what we have that is different.

If we and others were to reach out in love and practice hospitality wherever we can, who knows what might happen? Who knows what wider implications our practice of hospitality might have? The final stanza of the hymn we sang this morning perhaps might then be realized in our world.

*Then shall all shackles fall; the stormy clangor*

*of wild war music o’er the world will cease;*

*Love shall tread out the baleful ire of anger,*

*and in its ashes plant the tree of peace.*

May God grant it to be so. Amen.