

**THE WAY OF WELCOME**  
**Ethel Hornbeck**  
**September 6, 2015**  
**Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church**

**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.*

For the word of Love in scripture...

Today is Labor Day Sunday, and, according to the official the Presbyterian calendar, it is also the first Sunday of the "season of peace," which we began observing last Sunday when our children hung the yellow ribbons out on the front fence. This is our annual practice in memory of the battle of Antietam, and especially the sons of our nation who suffered and died on the floors of this very place; this practice reminds us to keep listening to their cries, and God's cries, for healing and peace. Today is also Welcome Back Sunday, the day that we set aside each fall for intentional welcoming. So--**welcome** to all those who have been away, busy or distracted, all newcomers, old timers, and those who are just passing through. Thank you all for being here. **We** are made more whole by **your** presence with us. Especially our college students—we've missed you and are so glad to welcome you back here!

*Welcome* is something we've been exploring here at SPC for quite some time, most visibly in our decades long journey toward full and joyful inclusion of our LGBT brothers and sisters. It's a journey that has taught us many things.

Welcome, we've learned, is not just a moment or a gesture, its also an attitude, a process, and a practice. Sometimes, we've learned, welcome is used as a weapon. Too many churches say "all are welcome" when what they really mean is: we welcome you, but only IF— IF you change what you believe or how you behave, IF you change *who you are* to fit our particular understanding of what is acceptable. Authentic welcome must be both unconditional and unambiguous. And getting *there* can be quite an adventure. It often starts with, "tolerance" – better than intolerance but still, can have a real teeth-gritted quality to it. Like the welcome children sometimes receive in church—*you can be here, but you better be invisible, or else!* What a gift that here children help us pray, bless the world, *and* see it more clearly—thanks to our children, we have blessed everything from Venus fly traps to blue footed boobies (and that's a bird, in case you missed it). "Inclusion" is better still, but can also be less than full acceptance, as in: you can come here, but we don't really have to like it, and we certainly don't have to allow you to serve—a curious "way of welcome" that churches have in the past extended to

people of color, to women and of course, for too many churches even today, to their gay and lesbian members.

True welcome is not just unconditional and unambiguous, it also requires a radical openness to the other which includes a willingness to be touched and changed. That kind of welcome ultimately invites celebration. Because as we discover more and more about the world, including the fullness of what it means to be human, which is so much bigger, brighter, more diverse, and more wildly unexpected than we could ever imagine on our own, how can we not respond: Halleluia!

Welcome can be big and public and it can also be quiet and personal. I have recently been in conversation, thanks to our virtual welcome (through our website, and its unambiguous symbols of welcome), with a gifted and lovely young woman, who it turns out, is becoming an even more gifted and lovely young man. Among many other things, **he** has shown **me** the immense healing power in calling someone by their true name and true pronouns. Tiny things (like pronouns) can hold big love; sometimes welcome requires the most careful attention.

In today's gospel story Jesus, is once again trying to slip away unnoticed, when he encounters a woman demanding his attention. *And she's a foreigner, a Gentile, unclean, not from his tribe.* The text also has clues that she was a woman of means-- member of the oppressing class, even. In any case—way outside of Jesus' understanding and circle of care. So at first, he doesn't just try to turn her away. He dehumanizes her. (Isn't that always the way?) He calls her a dog. Think female dog—and then multiply the ugliness of that. This was a very serious slur in Jesus' world, an unambiguous rejection.

The woman, however, stands firm. Demands that Jesus connect with her just as she is, and in that moment, something seismic shifts: in Jesus, in his perspective about himself, his relation to others, and ultimately his whole vision of what God is calling him to do. For Mark it is this encounter with this unnamed woman, and her challenge to Jesus' own boundaries, that opens him to a radical reorientation, to a new vision that **all are** welcome at the Beloved's table, where there is always more than enough.

Biblical commentaries employ every kind of angsty justification to explain away this unpleasant, unwelcoming, unkind Jesus, missing the beautiful and provocative picture of a human person, on his way to *becoming* what the Holy has created him to become.

In the words of scholar Sharon Ringe it was the woman's "act of trust, of engagement, risking everything ...that frees Jesus to respond, to heal, to become again the channel of God's redeeming presence... her wit, her sharp retort was her gift to Jesus that enables his gift of healing in turn, her ministry that opened up the possibility of his."

And I don't even see this story as so much a failure of compassion, as Ringe also argues, as it is a story of what compassion can look like *in action*. Jesus simply doesn't get it, at least at first. But he does stay with it, he pays attention, he listens, remains open and makes space. And when the woman enters in, he receives her, in all her strangeness *and* her suffering. In that *unwelcome moment*, Jesus is moved and he is changed, not just freed, but healed, enhanced, expanded.

*This is Jesus becoming fully divine by becoming fully human, Jesus on the way of welcome, grounded in compassion. Other traditions tell the story differently, but all*

agree—compassion is, as religious scholar Karen Armstrong has put it, “the fulfillment of human nature... something essential to the structure of our humanity.”

Contemporary neuroscience is increasingly proving what the spiritual traditions have argued all along. Our deepest truest identity, source of human being and well being is not, as our culture insists, self interest and competition, it is compassion and cooperation. These are innate human faculties, which like language, can be ignored and suppressed, or claimed, studied, and practiced.

Our commitment to the “way of welcome” is especially important whenever we encounter something or someone that we do not understand. Only by remaining open to the unknown, to Mystery, do we allow ourselves to be touched and changed, healed and expanded. It is a posture that must be grounded in the practice of compassion and self compassion, which invites us to extend the same kindness, generosity and understanding toward ourselves, our shortcomings, our bad attitudes, our suffering, as we would our most beloved friend. Notice how gracefully Jesus receives the woman’s rebuke and allows it to become a healing encounter, for the woman, her daughter, and for Jesus himself.

Here in this place, we claim together this “covenant to love God, ourselves and others wholeheartedly” which is really just another way of saying “welcome.” We don’t always get it right, but we have made a holy commitment, claimed the intention to travel a certain Way together. At times it can be perplexing, even painful but when we remain open, it is always healing and joyful, as well. And I believe that day by day, together, we are becoming—a more human, more welcoming school of love and community of prayer. We can’t ever claim that we have arrived, because arriving simply isn’t the point. There is always more--more to learn, more to hear, more to love, more to embrace, and more to celebrate.

So, listen up—welcome welcome welcome everyone, we’ve all got work to do. Compassion to cultivate. Self compassion to embrace and explore. And right here today, we might begin by paying attention to whatever or whoever in your life or yourself is hanging around under the table looking for a crumb--of attention, understanding, acceptance. Who or what are you are working the hardest to push away? “A joy, a depression, a meanness” as Rumi suggests: “welcome and entertain them all, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.”

All are welcome. May this be so.