

## **Included out: The Demands of Radical Hospitality**

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Mark 14:3-9

Matthew 15:21-28

### Included Out: The Demands of Radical Hospitality

You are standing outside - doubts - fears fill you...how can you do this - how be so bold? But that nagging, that feeling, that call perhaps - yes - take the gift - do it. What do you have? Just this...a jar of oil...you've been saving this for months - for what? Was it for this? Now...I must go...it is what I can do!

So you go and your worst fears are fulfilled. What are you doing, they demand...those around him, his chosen. The authorities are saying no, are saying you are wrong, who do you think you are? We know best how this oil can be used. This oil, no longer your oil. Sell it? Sell my gift? you are being denied, rejected, struck dumb in anger, fear and crushing disappointment. But wait, a voice is accepting and defending, a voice who sees you for what you are and accepts and encourages your gift. Your daughter is ill - demon possessed they say. Everyone shuns you - afraid - afraid that they too will fall victim to demons. There seems to be no hope. But then you hear of a miracle worker - a man who casts out demons - and wonder of wonders he is traveling in your area - out of his homeland. Here is your chance. Spotting him on the road you call respectfully, using the name you have heard is a term of great respect -Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. You've heard the stories of his great compassion, surely he will help your daughter. But there is no response. Perhaps he hasn't heard you so you call again and again. Still no response. You can hear his disciples, his chosen, telling him to send you away. No you cry - this is your last and only hope. And he does stop but his response is dismissive. Not at all what you've heard about him. And he turns to walk away. But you can't give up. You fall at his feet and plead. Instead of being moved he cuts you to the quick with his cold and cruel reply. But you will not give up and summoning all your wits you turn his cruel response back on him and wait. After pausing for longer than you can bear, your heart beating in your ears, you hear what you've longed to hear - great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish. And you just knew instantly that your daughter was well again. These may seem to be strange texts to use in a talk about radical hospitality. These two women were turned away in a most inhospitable fashion. But they mirror better than any other characters in the Bible the treatment of those whom the tradition includes out and as such are examples for us who have been included out for too long in our beloved UMC of persistence and faith and radical hospitality - that which they give and that which they receive.

I have to admit that the passage in Mark has always been one of the most difficult passages of scripture for me. Here is Jesus denying the poor. What kind of second century interpolation and intrusion is this into the text? The poor you will have with you always, indeed. A champion of the oppressed would never say such a thing. So in good exegetical style I handled it as I did all the passages that did not fit in with my theology and my vision of a radical Jesus - I ignored it.

But I stumbled across it again as I was in one of my "why the hell do I put up with the frustration and rejection of the church" mood. In her truly caring way Mary Daly had been

pushing me on why I stayed in the church. Again she was telling me to get out of the church before it killed me. And she did not mean that euphemistically. And here in my musing comes this unnamed woman. Why had I never seen this woman before? I had been so concerned about the social response that I had missed the context - a woman who doesn't even get her name mentioned is rejected as wrong and out of line by the men in authority.

Then into my mind strides Sojourner Truth. At the end of what has become known as her "And ain't I a woman" speech, Sojourner calls these men in authority down: Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn't a woman! Well, where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man didn't have nothing to do with him...

So here is my Jesus comin' from God and a woman defending a woman from attacks of the apostles. Jesus offers her radical hospitality in the face of the opposition of those in authority in his own circle, it is called forth by her radical act of hospitality. This anonymous woman's act of extravagant regard for Jesus stands as an example of loving compassion to one in need, an example of extravagant, radical hospitality to one who was soon to experience the worst the world could deal out. Jesus is shown here receiving from a woman in ways he is never shown receiving from men. Jesus was deeply stirred by this extravagant action. The unmeasured generosity of her giving, her radical welcome and love and hospitality, moved him. She did not pour out a few drops and say: Well, I guess that ought to be enough for this occasion. She acted out of the spontaneity of love. She was not smothered with caution and prudence. She was lifted clear out of arithmetic into love - one of the greatest leaps which a life can take.

Radical hospitality demands the unmeasured sharing of the best that we are and have. The tragedy is that people and institutions, most damningly the church, carries this radical inclusive love and hospitality through life in an unbroken jar. They have reserved themselves, their affections, their possible reaching out, their radical hospitality to those in deep need of welcome, of friendship, of comfort for people that seem worthy enough, occasions important enough. Life slips by and the perfume jar is never broken. Some others always measure themselves out with a deeper, frightened idea that they will spend it all and have none left. They are acting out of the conviction of scarcity. But radical hospitality calls for a spirit of abundance - that in giving, even more will be there, in welcoming, the family grows in numbers and in love and in spirit. Radical hospitality is best shown in those acts in which one person has broken that jar of precious perfume which was him/herself, in the sharing of all their best.

Jesus responds to that radical generosity, that radical act of hospitality and caring by defending and accepting her and her gift. He responds indignantly to the disciples -that's a pretty strong word. He tells them to let her alone. She has done a beautiful thing for me. There is the hospitality of duty and there is the radical hospitality and generosity of thoughtfulness to a friend or stranger, the celebration of love and friendship. To lift the dutiful up to the beautiful is the mark of true discipleship. And it is to be done in a ritual of remembrance - Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her. Ah, but here is the rub. We don't even know her name. Those in authority never bothered to record it despite Jesus' proclamation. An act of such radical hospitality that Jesus says it will be proclaimed forever in her name gets discounted, shoved aside, an inconvenient truth.

Where is my Jesus now? Once in a lecture I attended, James Cone asserted that the church was where liberation occurs, turning nobodies into somebodies. But for me and for many people, the church is where I experience the most oppression - in its polity, its politics, its theology, its worship, its hospitality. Churches who claim no apostolic succession have it

in many ways - the apostolic succession of being a bit slow on the uptake and a bit quick to reject.

Like the woman with the alabaster jar the gifts and graces of whole groups of people are being rejected by those laying around at supper with the Lord. And here we stand, our empty jar lying at our feet, broken - like our spirits - by these objections to our gift and hence our being. And we wait for the whispered affirmation of our dignity and integrity, of radical hospitality. Where is the affirmation of our beings in the church? Where do we experience radical hospitality in the church?

We have, most of us, felt, at one time, rejection of our gift and that is painful. But what is even more insidious is the rejection of whole groups or classes of people without ever looking at the individuals involved.

Many people are being denied their call by the successors to the apostles because of whom they love. Self-identified lesbians and gay men are even denied entrance to some DM seminaries and are denied ordination in the UMC by instituting legislation which can only lead to a purging witch hunt among its ordained clergy. The situation is set up to make non-people, nobodies, out of gay folk.

The ministry demands honesty and openness and integrity but the church necessitates lies and closedness. We are bottled up in our alabaster jars. As long as we are used for the appropriate service we are fine. When we spill out into the ministry we feel called to we are rejected by those very concerned and active people who care so much about the poor.

As a good church historian my mind constantly drifts back to the stories and sayings of the people of God which sustained them in times of great difficulty. Psalm 139 has been my favorite since I was a baby radical. Here is a psalm which shows no trace of any connection with the temple cult, which is probably why I like it, and is perhaps not just a little bit prophetic. This is a very personal psalm which reflects the psalmist's experience and knowledge of God. This is not an exercise in speculative theology but an affirmation of knowledge, love and presence. It is not only the psalmist's knowledge and love of God that is proclaimed, but also a strong statement that God knows us and knows us personally. God knows us, created us, loves us and is present with us. This God is with us and will not let us go, no matter where we are or however we seek to hide ourselves. This God calls us into our own because this God loves and knows us. Being called into our own is the utmost in radical hospitality. This God calls us to claim our full beings, our destinies which have been formed for us, our inheritances which no one can take from us.

This God who does not leave us alone, who strengthens us, knows us, loves us, and claims us as God's own - this God guides us to places where our alabaster jar must be broken, where we can do what we can do. She has done what she could. On the surface this seems like a tepid tribute. Why praise a person for doing what she could? Because often that is the very thing denied. Doing what we can these days demands courage and a sense of freedom. It demands that we go with the God who has searched us and known us into a world that knows us not and is not hospitable. As good clergy-types we often preach about the gospel promises, Jesus' promises which are always fulfilled and kept, right? Well, this text confronts us with a promise that was not fulfilled, at least not yet and certainly not by those in charge. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her. The gospel has not been traditionally preached in her name. Nowhere else in Mark is any person or action singled out for future remembrance. The writer of Mark doesn't even bother to record her name! But wherever the liberating gospel is preached by those who are oppressed - wherever people and congregations reach out in radical hospitality, sometimes at risk to themselves - there is that woman with her gift and her denial.

The Matthew text is, on the surface, another one of those I would ordinarily skip.

Again, this is definitely not my nice, radical, social justice Jesus. But we have an encounter with another unnamed woman and suddenly nothing will be the same again - for Jesus, for the woman, for us.

I must confess (and after all confession is good for the soul and it is Lent after all) my radical feminist soul loves this passage. It is the only place where Jesus loses an argument and not to Scribes or Pharisees but to a woman, a non-Jewish woman at that. And who says the bible is unrelentingly patriarchal? This woman fascinates me. She is clear about what she wants. Makes no apology for who she is or what she is asking for and she won't quit, despite being ignored and criticized for her presence and her request. She just won't take no for an answer. And in that persistence she teaches Jesus a lesson on the meaning of faith and radical hospitality.

It is important that we closely examine the sequence of events in this encounter if we are to understand its full impact, not only for Jesus but for ourselves as well. The woman calls out to Jesus. Have mercy on me Son of David. She addresses him with respect and calls on his most basic characteristic, calls on his faithfulness to Micah 6:8: what does God require of you but to love justice, seek mercy, and walk humbly with your God. This is the first time in Matthew's gospel that the voice of a woman is heard. The woman is not asking for tangible things for herself. She is asking a healing for her daughter's sake. But she is asking something for herself as well, she is asking for his mercy - for his understanding, his compassion for her pain, for his welcome of radical hospitality. What is Jesus' response? He does not answer her at all. She is ignored. Maybe she will go away and I won't have to confront her, won't have to say the judgmental things I feel. But she persists. So much so that the disciples get into the act and urge Jesus, not to give her what she wants to get rid of her, but to send her away -away empty handed. Why do they want her sent away? Because she keeps shouting at us. Now do you get the full picture? This was no meek and mild woman quietly petitioning the great healer-rabbi. This was a bold, determined woman who was following this great man and his disciples yelling at them to pay attention, to deal with her. Now do you see why we should have such an affinity with this woman - we who have been shouting at the church for years for justice, for mercy, for healing of the pain to which they contribute, for an experience of radical hospitality.

And finally she gets a response. It was not a polite brush off. All right I was trying to avoid saying this outright to you, trying to spare your feelings. But if you are going to push like this ...well, you deserve to hear it. My healing and teaching are not for you, only for the lost sheep of Israel. This gutsy and proud woman will still not be deterred. She kneels before him and very simply says Lord help me. Here is no protest about Canaanites are just as good as Jews, no protestation of injustice. No cry of it's not fair. Just a simple plea directed to his humanity - Lord help me.

And still Jesus is not moved. Boy, she is really asking for it this time. Ok, the brutal, cold-hard truth of the matter. It is not fair to take children's food and throw it to dogs. Now look who's talking fair! Jesus calls the woman a dog and he's the one who is trying to base his position on fairness.

Amazingly enough, the woman retains her cool. I have to admit that I'm not sure I would have been so civil in my response. It is in her very civility and her ability to take the response and turn it to her advantage that the story finds its power. She begins by allowing him his bigoted opinion. Yes, Lord, she says. And then comes the zinger. Yet, even dogs eat crumbs that fall from the master's table. What can Jesus say? He has been bested at his own game. He, who has seen the most learned people of the time squirm on the point of his rapier wit, has just been skewered by his own argument. And give him points, he is gracious in defeat. And he is open to change, indeed, has the courage to change and to respond to one

who was outside his sphere. He, whose whole message was faithfulness to God, is surprised by faith. He, whose whole message was radical inclusion and hospitality to the marginalized, is surprised by radical hospitality lived out.

Jesus does not say OK you win your daughter is healed. Rather he says, let it be done for you as you wish. It is not even clear that Jesus is doing the healing. The control, power, everything, seems to be given over to her. And instantly her daughter was healed. The exclamation O Woman, great is your faith - points to Jesus' recognition of the woman's insight into the inclusive nature of the power and presence of God in Jesus' own preaching and healing ministry and her faithfulness to that insight. The great faith of the woman also acts as a foil to the lack of understanding of the disciples who would have sent her away without compassion.

Well, what are we to do with this passage? Chalk it up as an interesting anomaly in Jesus' ministry? Preach nice supercessionist sermons on how this shows that God intends for the gentile church to be the true inheritors of Jesus' teaching and ministry? Or to challenge this anti-semitic reading by being clear that this just shows the universalism which the church should exhibit and which it will have, because God wills it? These are the traditional interpretations of this passage. But those who know me have figured out that I rarely if ever put forth the traditional understanding of anything. This is a story about being included out and as such, it speaks clearly to us and to the church today.

It is crucial to see that Jesus rejects this unnamed Canaanite woman because he does not relate to her as an individual, but as a class. Nothing personal, but I don't do Gentiles. My good woman, listen to reason. You just aren't the right type. Now run along and let me get back to the business about which I am supposed to be going. I have a vivid imagination and I can just picture Jesus turning to stride off, freezing in mid-air almost at her reply. He was surprised, shaken, changed. And in this altered state he had to look at her, to see her, not some foreign woman but a mother who was in deep pain and distress because her daughter was ill and she needed help and turned to the person she had been led to believe would help because he had done so for others and because of his own teachings. In faith she asked to be considered on her own merits, not as a "type" but as an individual and as a child of the one, living God. This scenario is played out over and over again in society and the church. Whole "types" of people come to the church with their needs, drawn by the message of radical love and liberation, of radical welcome and hospitality proclaimed from pulpit and press. Open hearts, open minds, open doors. Yet they find when they voice those needs that they are included out - the message is for all, oh, but not you, we weren't really thinking of you when we said that. And as the church is confronted by these included outs will it have the courage and wisdom and understanding to be shaken by the persistent arguments for inclusion, for change, for radical hospitality, for the living out of its slogan? We can all call up in our minds and our experiences the included outs - women, people of color, gay folks. For some there is a grudging inclusion but for many, most particularly lesbian and gay folks there are not even crumbs available because you are not worthy even for those. The words the unnamed woman spoke have always called up for me the traditional communion liturgy. I can still quote most of it from memory. The part that stuck in my throat even as a child was: Oh Lord, I am not worthy so much as to gather the crumbs from under your table, but only say the word and I shall be healed. Even dogs eat crumbs that fall from the Master's table. This unnamed woman speaks a powerful challenge to that cringing, pathetic picture of humanity. I am somebody. I am the image of God, loved, known, called. I am here because of that call whether you recognize it or not and I will continue to be faithful to my God and my call whether you ignore, condemn or persecute me. I will still be here.

This unnamed Canaanite woman taught Jesus what radical hospitality is. We are

blessed that some of his daughters and sons, some of his communities of faith like those gathered here, have learned the lesson and are living out that radical hospitality. We need to hear the voice of the included out. Let us pray to God for the capacity to be shocked, shaken and transformed by the persistent, proud faith of that unnamed Canaanite woman and her sons and daughters.

And yet the cry goes up: Why won't this issue go away? I thought we'd settled this last General Conference. How long are we going to waste time debating this matter? How many parliamentary moves can a group of people do? Sound familiar? These sentiments are probably the most common statements heard as General Conference 2008 approaches. But I took these not from current debates but from sentiments expressed prior to the 1888 General Conference. While the subject matter is different, the issue is the same - who is included in the body of Christ, who is the church, who is welcome? And as in 1888 so in 2008, people who are sure the church will be destroyed by an inclusive, radical hospitality stance stand ready to block, by any means necessary, the full participation of the people of God. They will use Christian language to include certain Christians out.

Another commonality which links these conferences together is the issue of language. The five women delegates duly elected to the 1888 General Conference by their respective annual conferences were denied seating based on the interpretation of the word "layman". Did this include women or not? The bishops, in the opening address resolved the issue before there could even be debate - no. In 2008 we will be struggling with issues of language and its meaning of who exactly is welcome into membership in the UMC, who is welcome in the ministry of the UMC.

It still comes down to the same concern - who is included, fully and integrally, to whom is radical hospitality offered. Frances Willard, the most powerful laywoman of her day was one of those elected to the 1888 General Conference. She had already been rebuffed by her "dear Mother Church" in 1880 when, after long debate as to whether she could address the conference for ten minutes on the issue of temperance, a cause for which she spent her whole life fighting, she was advised to decline and write a short note to the conference instead. These rebuffs, not only by her opponents but by her friends and colleagues as well, shook her to the core. Yet she remained faithful to the MEC until her death. She did not acquiesce. She knew what her God called her to do. She knew what her church had the potential to do. Let us in the hard days ahead remember Frances Willard - not just to our selves but out loud to the whole church, to remind them of their/our history of exclusion and inhospitality, to remind them of what could be and was lost and to call out in the name of all those included out to open the circle, yea, to widen the circle to include those who have been included out - to live the radical hospitality a great number of our local churches embody - to be willing like Jesus to defend when others are criticized for doing what they could and to learn from a woman, an outsider, what it truly means to be the whole people of God.