

2021 09 05 – Voices from the Margins

This has been both an exciting and a challenging week. Our children and grandchildren have been heading back to school, from pre-school to high school and even college and university. They are excited to see old friends and to make new ones. They are excited about being able to participate in science labs and discussion groups and sports and other extra-curricular activities. But, at the same time as their world is opening up, the fourth wave of COVID-19 is hitting hard and fast. On Friday, Saskatchewan reported the highest number of new cases of COVID-19 this year – 418 people tested positive.

During this same week our Church Council made the decision to return to in-person worship next Sunday, September 12th. We are, in fact, the last congregation in this city to make that move. But it was still not an easy decision to make. There were lots of factors to consider. To be honest there was also frustration and fatigue. Most of us are tired of talking about this pandemic. After a relatively care-free summer, it was disappointing to know that we weren't going to have a welcome-back party like the one we had envisioned last spring. Making the decision to return to our sanctuary, with restrictions such as mandatory masks and physical distancing was a compromise—a way to be together while still apart.

Jesus also understood fatigue and frustration. Some biblical scholars believe that he went into the territory of Tyre and Sidon because he needed a rest.

Jesus thought travelling that far away from home, into an area where there were

very few Jewish people, would make it easy for him to go unrecognized. But instead, Jesus discovered that his fame had preceded him. He had to hide inside someone's house in order to find the peace and quiet that he needed.

But even there, his much-needed solitude was interrupted. A woman with a sick daughter heard where he was, came in unannounced and fell at his feet. She begged Jesus to expel the demon from her daughter. She begged him to make her daughter well. Jesus could no doubt tell from her clothes and her accent that she was a Gentile, a non-Jew. The woman was, in fact, a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth. Up to this point, Jesus' ministry had been focussed in his home province of Galilee, with his own people. In Jesus' Jewish, patriarchal, world this intruder had multiple strikes against her: her race, her gender and the fact that she had forced her way into his company.

Jesus responded to her pleas by saying, "Let the children of the household satisfy themselves at table first. It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." Yes, Jesus was referring to Jewish people as the children of the household and yes, he called the Syro-Phoenician woman a dog. It's hard to imagine such a harsh rebuke coming from this gentle rabbi's mouth. We could blame it on his fatigue, on her sudden appearance or we could just admit that Jesus was human and he was a product of his time. Jesus responded as his culture had taught him to respond.

I wonder, has our culture taught us any better? Before any of us get on our high horse let's consider all the times that we have eaten our fill while ignoring the

needs of others. The most current example that comes to mind is the distribution of vaccines across our planet. While we in the western world contemplate a third booster shot, there are many in poorer countries who have received no vaccine at all. The World Health Organization is imploring us to delay our third shots until the most vulnerable across the world have been vaccinated. But are we listening? <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/canada-covid-19-booster-shots-3rd-dose-1.6164614>

In today's story the woman heard what Jesus' said and replied, "Yes Rabbi, but even the dogs under the table eat the family's scraps." What an incredibly brilliant and impertinent response. This woman had both wit and courage. And this time Jesus heard her. This time he recognized her for who she was, "a beloved child of God." Jesus heard her, he saw her and he responded, "For saying this, you may go home happy; the demon has left your daughter."

Jesus heard what the Syro-Phoenician woman said and he opened his heart and his mind so that her words had the power to change him. Because of her, Jesus realized that his ministry was bigger than he originally thought. Jesus realized that his message of God's love was meant for more than just his Jewish family. It's not just a coincidence that the very next healing story in the gospel of Mark is a story about Jesus opening the ears and the tongue of someone who was deaf and mute. The author is highlighting the importance of opening ourselves to the voices of those on the margins, those we experience as "the other."

One of the books that I read while on sabbatical is called *Postcolonial Preaching* and it focusses on raising the voices of those who have been colonized, the

voices of the marginalized. The author, HyeRan Kim-Cragg was born in Korea and is now a United Church minister and professor at Emmanuel College in Toronto. She writes:

An important shift in the power dynamic takes place when people from cultures that are not dominant become teachers, and the people from white Anglo cultures become learners. (*Postcolonial Preaching*, pg 111 Kindle Edition)

In today's story Jesus became the learner, and the Syro-Pheonician woman, the teacher.

Too often the voices of the marginalized in our society are not heard. I read another article in the CBC News this week about COVID-19 that began by saying, "The province's far north is leading [Saskatchewan] in cases per capita and has the lowest vaccination rates." It went on to compare numbers in the various parts of our province, highlighting the high number of cases in all the northern regions and the low rate of vaccination amongst their young people. I kept reading, wanting to understand why the numbers were so skewed. I kept reading, waiting to hear the story of someone who lives in the north. I kept reading, but was sorely disappointed. To me, the numbers are meaningless without the voices of those who are impacted.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/covid-19-cases-vaccinations-sk-1.6163916>

When our Church Council met to talk about in-person worship this week, Kevin Hanna, our chairperson, made sure that everyone there had an opportunity to

speak and we also shared the stories of those who were not at our meeting. We considered the voices of unvaccinated children and their parents and the voices of those who are unable to worship via Zoom. We considered the voices of those who are especially vulnerable to COVID-19 and the voices of those who are fighting depression because of the isolation that they are experiencing. The decision to return to in-person worship was made knowing that our congregation is divided on this question and that some would choose, for good reason, not to return at this time.

As we move forward into a new week I invite us all to truly listen to the stories of those on the margins of our society, those whose voices are often muted. I invite us to listen to the stories of those who are different than us, those who we see as “the other,” I invite us to open our hearts and minds so that, like Jesus, we too may be transformed. May it be so. Amen.