

## 2024 09 08 – *Room for All*

**Scripture: Mark 7:24-30** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

This week I listened to a [lecture](#) given by a man named Doug Saunders. Doug Saunders is a Canadian journalist and author and his books and research centre around the topic of immigration. The reason I was interested in his lecture, was because Saunders was talking about a book that he authored called [Maximum Canada](#). I had recently heard about this book because our Moderator, The Right Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne, is planning to discuss this book in her next [online book study](#). In his book, Saunders presents a bold vision for Canada's future; he suggests that tripling our population is essential for our country's prosperity, equality, and sustainability.

It was a fascinating lecture to listen to in September of 2024 when the topic of immigration is so politically charged! We have the election south of the border where immigration, especially along their border with Mexico, is a huge topic of conversation. Here in Canada, many believe that high levels of immigration are putting a strain on both housing and health care and changes in our immigration policies are already starting to happen. So what is the right answer? Should we be charging forward or holding back? Is there sufficient for everybody, or do we need to close our borders to ensure that those who are already here have enough?

In today's scripture reading, Jesus was faced with a similar question. Jesus had just recently travelled from Gennesaret, on the western shore of the Sea of

Galilee, to the territory of Tyre and Sidon by the Mediterranean Sea. Some biblical scholars believe Jesus left his home province in order to get some much needed rest and relaxation. He probably 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 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 and patriarchal world this intruder had multiple strikes against her: her race, her gender, her culture 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," God's children, and yes, he called the Syro-Phoenician woman a dog. It's hard to imagine such a harsh rebuke coming from this particular rabbi's mouth. We could blame it on his fatigue, on her sudden appearance or we could just admit that Jesus was human and a product of his

time. Jesus responded as his religion and culture had taught him to respond. He responded from a place of prejudice and scarcity.

I wonder how much of the discussion around immigration in Canada and the United States is also based on these two factors, on our often prejudiced response to “the other,” and our worry about not having enough?

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 this outsider for who she was: a beloved child of God, a member of God’s family. 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 healing message of God’s love was meant for more than just his own people. Jesus realized that when it comes to God’s love there are no boundaries, no borders, no laws keeping people away.

As Christians, as members of The United Church of Canada, we are called to love as God loves. We are called to care for all of God’s creation, not just that part of creation that exists within our own family, church or community. We are

called to open ourselves, our churches, our communities to the needs of the outsider, the other, even when it means that we could be changed in the process.

Change is our reality whether we realize it or not. This week I also read [an article](#) from the most recent [Broadview](#) magazine that talked about the growth initiative of our national church. Referring to the United Church's latest annual report the article said, "the section dedicated to growth profiles a new ministry that the report calls 'one of 40 possible new communities of faith among migrant, diasporic, and francophone communities being explored through the Growth initiative.'" In other words, our own denomination is also growing because of migration. The face of The United Church in Canada is changing.

Even within our own congregation, we are exploring the possibility of sharing what God has provided for us in new ways. Our Leadership Team here at First United is reaching out to other denominations within Swift Current looking for ways to share resources and maybe even buildings. We have been talking to local non-profit businesses about leasing rooms within Knox Hall. The face of First United is also changing.

Whenever I think about immigration, I have to remind myself, that the only people in Canada who are not immigrants or descended from immigrants are the Indigenous peoples. Here in this sanctuary and online most of us are first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, or maybe more generation immigrants. My own ancestors arrived from Ireland and England in the mid 1800's. They came looking

for the kind of safety and prosperity that was impossible in their own country.

They came for reasons no different than those who are immigrating today.

I don't pretend to know the answers to the immigration question. I do agree that if our governments are following the advice of people like Doug Saunders, then they also need to invest in our infrastructure to make that growth possible.

But what I want us to be aware of, as we think about this question or the question of change in our own church, is our own motivation. Are we looking at these issues from a position of love and courage or a place of distrust and cowardice? To use the image from today's scripture: Are we seeing those who wish to enter our country, our community or our church as unwanted dogs or as precious children of God? Are we just closing the door or are we figuring how to share what God has provided for us?

Earlier today we sang:

:”Let us build a house where all are named  
Their songs and visions heard  
And loved and treasured, taught and claimed  
As words with in the Word.” (MV #1)

May it be so. Amen.