**We Accept Our Mission**

**Text: Mark 7:25-30**

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50 years ago this week, Disciples of Christ from across the United States and Canada convened in Seattle, Washington for our first biennial General Assembly. The theme of the Assembly was *We Accept Our Mission*. It was taken from the Preamble to our newly minted Design: “We accept our mission of witness and service to all people.”

The Design and the General Assembly were the culmination of a restructure process that had been going on within the Disciples movement for a decade.

Part of that process was the merger of the work of black Disciples and white Disciples. They’d been operating as almost parallel denominations within the Disciples movement, but in 1969 they merged into one integrated ministry. It was a mission of witness and service to *all* people.

Part of the process was to streamline a rather convoluted denominational structure so as to more effectively minister to an increasingly complex world. It was a mission of witness and service to all people.

And part of the process going forward these past 50 years has been the creation of a church that has become increasingly open to a diverse assortment of God’s children: black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific islanders, gay, straight, bisexual, transgender…We Disciples are truly part of a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. It is a mission of witness and service to *all* people.

Which brings us to the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman in the 7th chapter of Mark’s gospel. The story depicts a moment in Jesus’ ministry when he was challenged on just how inclusive his mission was supposed to be. Was he called to witness and serve all people, or just some?

Jesus has been ministering in the area around the Sea of Galilee: preaching and teaching and healing and confronting the rigidity of the religious power structure. He’s been engaged in some tough work. So he decides to go on retreat for a while. He heads for the coastal city of Tyre, nearly 40 miles from the Galilean Sea. He’s going to take some R and R on the beach, where he thinks that no one will recognize him.

But Jesus’ reputation has proceeded him. Mark says that “he was barely inside” the guest house when a woman with a disturbed daughter knelt at his feet. She *begged* him to cure her daughter.

Now the woman was Greek. That’s what some translations say. Others say that she was a Gentile. But the point is, she was *not* a Jew. She was a *foreigner*. She was a woman of faith, yes; but not the *Jewish* faith.

This is a problem, because – the way that Mark tells the story – Jesus thinks that his mission is only to the Jews. He says, “Stand in line and take your turn. The children get fed first.” By which he apparently means “the children of Israel get fed first.” We read it this way because in Matthew’s version of the same story Jesus says, “Send her away…I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Jesus says, “The children get fed first, and then the dogs.” Which is a shocking statement because “the dogs” was one of the ways that the Jews of Jesus’ day referred to anyone who was not a Jew. It was a racial slur. It was a racist statement. And we wonder how Jesus could have possibly said such a thing.

There are two possibilities: Either Jesus grossly misunderstood his mission early in his ministry, or Mark has put the words in Jesus’ mouth. Either Jesus had a rather steep learning curve, or Mark is using a story about Jesus to address racism in the early Church. I’m inclined to go with the latter. If Jesus is who the Christian tradition says he is – the incarnation of the Holy One and a man who did not sin – I cannot imagine him so misunderstanding his mission or making such a racist statement. Furthermore, there’s lots of evidence to suggest that the early Church used and embellished stories about Jesus to address issues within its pioneer congregations. I think that’s what’s happening here. You’ve got Jewish-Christians within Mark’s congregation who want to keep Gentiles out of their church. They want to worship with only Jewish converts to Christianity. No Gentiles need apply. But Mark – like Paul before him and John after him – Mark knew that God so loved the *whole* world that he sent his only begotten Son, that *whosoever* believeth in him might have eternal life (John 3:16). Jesus had a mission to *all* people. So Mark – being a fisher of men – Mark catches the bigots on his line by having Jesus say, “The children of Israel get fed first, and then the Gentile dogs.” He hooks them, and then he reels them in. He has this Syro-Phoenician women – this Gentile dog – engaging Jesus with the clever line that even the dogs get the scraps that are dropped by the children. She says, “So even if you do think that I’m a dog, toss me some scraps, dude; heal my daughter!” And Jesus recognizes great faith even in someone who is not a Jew. Jesus reaches beyond the stereotypes and the fears and the religious borders of the 1st century and embraces someone whom just a moment before he had labeled “the other.”

Mark’s message to the racists within his congregation seems to be, “Go and do likewise.”

“We accept our mission of witness and service to *all* people.” The words could apply to Mark’s church as well as our own. And these words were never more timely. We all know about the rise of racism and white nationalism in this country. Of course it’s been there, lying beneath the surface for a *long* time. There’s nothing new about racism in this country. But it’s reared its ugly head in recent years; as if someone in hiding has gotten a message saying that it’s safe to come out again. And I’m talking not just about the horrible violence and hatred that is happening elsewhere in the country, but also about events in my own neighborhood. In the wee hours of last Monday morning, someone dropped racist literature on a number of driveways in Bloomington. 2 of those driveways were on our street. Both houses have mixed-race families. The literature included a picture of a man in full Ku Klux Klan regalia, and the words said that we need to keep our neighborhoods safe for white people.

Of course, it’s not just the distribution of racist literature in Bloomington. It’s not just the horrific violence against people who have been targeted simply because they are not white, or not Christian, or not born in the United States. It’s not just the language suggesting that if you don’t agree with me than you must somehow hate this country and you should go back to where your parents came from. It’s *all* of this, and so much more. And it reflects the same dynamic that a faction within Mark’s church was engaged in: drawing boundaries, suggesting that some people ought to be in, and some people ought to be out, implying that some people are more acceptable in the eyes of God than others.

That’s not the Gospel that I’ve been reading. That’s not the message of the Risen Lord: who directs the Church to make disciples of *all* nations. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,” Paul says, naming the groups that some were excluding in his day; no, “*all* are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

When I was a little boy, there was an older girl who would often hang-out around our church on Sunday mornings. I can’t remember her ever coming inside the building, I don’t remember her in worship or Sunday School or coffee hour, but she’d be hanging around outside after church, dressed for church as if she *wanted* to come in. The reason I remember her so clearly is that she was missing most of her right arm. Whether it was by amputation or she’d been missing it from birth I have no idea. She never came into the church; maybe because she didn’t feel welcome. In fact, I’m *sure* that she didn’t feel welcome because one day one of the members of the congregation chased her away! But she kept coming back, as if she knew that Jesus wanted her there, even if some of the church members didn’t. I do remember my dad talking with her one day: showing her the church bulletin, talking with her about what happens in worship. I’d like to think that he invited her to stay for church. But at least someone showed her some kindness; someone offered her some spiritual food; not just the scraps that fell from the table.

We humans are so quick to label people as the other; so quick to identify something about them that in our minds makes them different from us and therefore somehow inferior to us. Sometimes we go so far as to blame people for stuff that isn’t their fault. Like the President blaming black people in Baltimore for living in rat-infested homes. Never mind the fact that his own son-in-law owns thousands of housing units in Baltimore that have been sighted frequently for building-code violations.

Why are we so quick to judge? Why are we so quick to blame? Why are we so quick to play the superiority card?

We accept our mission of witness and service to all people; whether it’s a foreigner, of another religion, in the 1st century; or people born in another country, or of another race, or of another religion, or differently abled, or otherwise deemed different from ourselves in the 21st century. We are all children of God. We are all created in the image of God. To draw boundaries – whether thy be of a geographic or racial or religious or ethnic nature – to draw boundaries and then label people as being different and inferior simply because they were born on the other side of any those arbitrarily drawn boundaries is to engage in the idolatry of race and bigotry and to fall into the demonic grasp of heresy.

We accept our mission of witness and service to *all* people. There are several ways in which our Disciples heritage speaks directly to this heresy of exclusion.

First, when we invite all to the Table of the Lord, we engage in not only a liturgical act but we’re also making a theological and moral statement. We are saying that all people everywhere bear the image of the Holy One. We are saying that the resources of this earth – symbolized by the bread and the wine – have been given by God for all to enjoy. We are saying that in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) *all* are welcome – at this Table, in our building, at the Camp, in all aspects of the life of the Church, *all* are welcome; as God has welcomed each and every one of us.

Second, we Disciples have always tried to focus on biblical ideas, rather than those ideas that we deem to be of merely human origin. Well, I want to suggest that national boundaries have more to do with human practice than biblical doctrine. I mean, there are all sorts of practical reasons why nations need borders and some degree of border protection. My dad worked for U.S. Customs, so I get this. And I often had to deal with Customs officers when I lived in Canada and frequently crossed the U.S.-Canadian border. One time when I was driving home to Chicago for Christmas I had a huge load of gifts. I knew that I was going to have to pay some duty, but after the Customs officer asked me a few questions, he just waved me on. I said, “Wait a minute, I owe you some money.” There are lots of practical reasons why nations need borders and some degree of border protection, and as Christian citizens it is our duty to obey the border protection laws that are put in in place; so long as those laws are just. But it’s interesting that this nation was not concerned about having especially *hard* borders until the people coming across those borders were folks from places other than western and central Europe. Prior to the early 20th century we had relatively open borders in this country…which explains how most of our ancestors got here.

Our hard borders date from the 1920’s, when strict immigration laws were enacted. Those laws established immigration quotas for various nationalities. Those quotas were percentages of how many people from each nation entered the country 30 years earlier. Why go back 30 years? Why not go back just 5 or 10 years? Because it was just shy of 30 years earlier – in the 1890’s – that large numbers of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and from Asia started entering the U.S. Basing the quotas on 1890 immigration levels would provide a legal justification for keeping out the relatives and the fellow countryman of these more recent immigrants from nations that had been deemed undesirable.

It was the liberals of that era – the progressives – who were pushing for these changes. They had bought into the cutting edge science of the day that purported to prove that folks from western and central Europe were intellectually and morally superior to folks from the rest of the world. Of course, that pseudo-science has long since been debunked. Nevertheless, armed with this pseudo-science, it was the progressives who were pushing for hard borders. A more traditional conservative argument on immigration would be that we need fairly soft borders, so that immigrants will come into our country and work for lower wages than the people who are already here; or will take jobs that the people who are already here won’t take. A conservative argument would be that immigration is good for profits and good for the economy.

But in the final analysis Disciples should ask not what science or economics might say, but what does the Bible say? What would Jesus do? We Disciples at our best have been focused on biblical doctrines, not human-made ideas. When Jesus healed the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, he reached across an arbitrary border that had everything to do with human ideas, and nothing to do with God’s Word.

Third, Disciples have a long history of speaking out against racism and injustice. One of our founders, Alexander Campbell, was himself a Scots-Irish immigrant. Our other founder, Barton W. Stone, was an abolitionist. Butler University was founded by Disciples in the 1850’s as an abolitionist institution of higher education. The Disciples Women Board of Missions was in the forefront of missionary outreach to people of a variety of races when it was founded in 1874. Disciples leaders were deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Our first General Minister and President, Dr. A. Dale Fiers, stared down a delegation of white pastors who insisted the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. should not be permitted to speak at our Dallas International Convention in 1966. As some early Disciples said, “Where the Bible speaks, we speak; and where the Bible is silent, we’re silent.” Well, the Bible says that Jew and Gentile and all people everywhere are children of the One God. So I think that we Disciples need to speak that biblical truth. We need to tell our state representatives and our Congressman and our Senators about that biblical truth. We need to tell our President about that biblical truth. We need to especially tell our neighbors about that biblical truth. And we need to live out that biblical truth, by making sure that all of God’s children are indeed welcome in this building and in this Sanctuary and at this Table. This is the mission that we accepted 50 years ago. This is the mission that Jesus embraced when he cast out the demonic affliction of the Syro-Phoenician daughter. It is the mission of casting out the demonic affliction of racism and idolatry wherever that evil is encountered. As an act of rededication to that mission, I invite all of you to stand, look at the screen or open a hymnal to # 355, and let us affirm in unison our faith as Disciples of Christ.