

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, September 12, 2021
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost in Ordinary Time

“The Only Thing We Have We Have to Exclude Is Exclusion Itself”

First of five sermons of a series entitled:
“Re-launching to Belong, Believe, and Become”



Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 125
Christian Scripture: Mark 7:24-30



A woman by the name of Karen Taylor tells us of one of her early memories feeling excluded. She wrote, “I don’t remember much about the fifth grade, but one memory has never left me. I was invited to play with a group of kids, one of whom, Michelle, lived several houses down the street. Being the new kid on the block, I was excited to play with Michelle and meet some of her friends. When I

approached Michelle's house, she and several kids were playing in her front yard [...]. I stood outside of the gate. Michelle [...] met me at the gate. [...] One of Michelle's friends walked up and said, "Why is 'she' here? She doesn't look like us." Michelle looked at me, looked at her friend, shrugged her shoulders, and walked away. I was so stunned and hurt, but I didn't have the courage to say or do anything. So, I stood there. Crushed—unable to move. Tears rolling down my face. But what still sticks out most vividly about that day was the irony of standing on the other side of gate--alone.¹



Have you ever felt excluded? Felt like you didn't belong? Felt like an outsider? My parents were in the military and we moved every three years or so, so I know I have. And more importantly, I've never forgotten how I felt during those times.

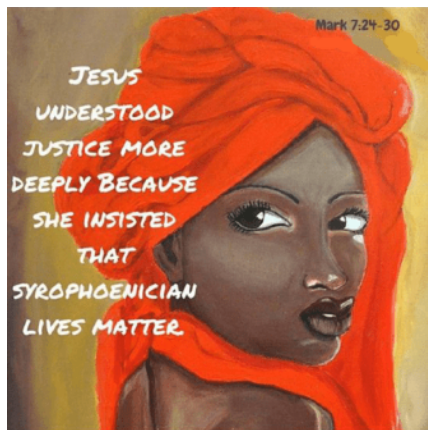
¹ Chris Taylor, "The Pain of Exclusion, the Power of Inclusion", *LinkedIn*, October 17, 2018. Found at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/pain-exclusion-power-inclusion-carin-taylor>, accessed September 11, 2021.



In the story that Bonnie read for us, we hear about an excluded woman. Surprisingly, Jesus is the one who excludes her. The story is unique for it is perhaps the only recorded argument Jesus lost. He beat Satan. He won over the scribes and Pharisees. But this one woman bested him in argument. In this morning's story, Jesus the teacher is taught, and from this lesson he perhaps realized for the first time that his ministry was universal rather than local.

The story is not complicated. Jesus needed some down time. It seems the pressing needs of the people exhausted him. Jesus felt burnt-out. He needed a retreat. Jesus felt crushed by the demands of his people, so he escaped across the border to a foreign land, away from the crowds. Yet, a woman sought him out so as to heal her daughter. The woman was a Greek or Syrophenician and thus to Jesus she was a pagan and a foreigner – and, by default, a sinner. In a way, Jesus excluded the woman and acted like Michelle and her friends in story I told about Karen at the beginning of this message. Jesus said to her, “First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27). When Jesus referred to ‘children’ he spoke of the nation of

Israel, the Hebrews, the Jews. When Jesus referred to ‘dogs’, he spoke of Gentiles.² There is no doubt about it, Jesus initially excluded this woman and her people from the healing and salvific power of God. Instead of being understandably stunned, hurt, and tearful like Karen, the cheeky Syrophenician woman retorted back, “Even the dogs eat the children’s crumbs under the table”. Jesus, perhaps embarrassed and ashamed, healed her daughter.



This morning’s scripture communicates that Jesus did not initially understand that ‘Syrophenician Lives Matter’.³ As pagan female foreigners, she and her daughter were considered outside God’s covenant and therefore outside Jesus’ ministry. Yet, the Syrophenician woman revealed to Jesus God’s extravagant welcome and love for *all* people, creatures, and Creation.

² Lindsey Pherigo, “The Gospel According to Mark”, in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles Laymond (Nashville: Abington Press, 1989), 656.

³ A ‘play’ on “Black Lives Matter”



It seems to be a human inclination to exclude. The reasons are complex. Often humans feel more secure if they are with others who are similar to them (homogeneity) – so to be with someone different engenders insecurity (xenophobia). Michelle and her friends obviously felt more comfortable playing with those who looked like them – however they looked.



Humans often exclude in order to feel superior to other people. The elevation of another is considered a devaluation of oneself. In the case of the Syrophenician woman, Jesus understood himself and his people to be special, members of the Abrahamic covenant, and thus favored by God. Jesus voiced his superiority complex to such an extent that he called his people 'children' and all others 'dogs'.




Humans often exclude because they are reluctant to spend the extra energy and money required to accommodate others different from themselves and who perhaps need assistance. Initially, Jesus simply had not the patience, compassion, or energy to include others in his mission. Ignoring and walking away is often easier and cheaper than including and accommodating.

I have a close friend who recently began working with mentally and physically challenged youth.

SRV

The major goal of SRV is to create or support socially valued roles for people in their society, because if a person holds valued social roles, that person is highly likely to receive from society those **good things in life** that are available to that society.



While running, he taught me about a theory called ‘Social Role Valorization’.⁴ In short it says that society devalues and stigmatizes at least a third of its members. It’s *possible* that Psalm 125 today expresses a ‘pre-Syrophoenician woman “those who are in” and a “those who are out”’ theology when it refers God doing good to some and banishing others. Those who are banished can experience negative associations, rejection, abuse, violence, and even death. My friend explained to me that when one of these excluded people take on even ONE socially valued role, no matter how modest, say volunteering at our church, it improves that person’s experience and the community’s perception of such a person. I would like to thank my friend for teaching me just as the Syrophoenician woman taught Jesus. Because of our conversation, I will forever be more sensitive as a minister; I will seek out opportunities to include in our church those who society excludes.

Let me share with you one last short story. On the last weekend of the summer, Stephanie and I took the girls to a beautiful lake. At the lake, we witnessed in wonder Lydia’s new *modus operandi* for making friends. She simply approached any child near her and asked, “Do you want to be my friend?” Her style was as forward and abrupt as that. No ‘hello’; no ‘what is your name?’. Lydia did not discriminate or judge, she did not waver, she exhibited no anxiety or self-

⁴ International Social Role Valorization Association, “SRV Theory”, found at: <https://socialrolevalorization.com/srv-theory/>, accessed September 11, 2021.

consciousness. Throughout the day, it was simply and shockingly: ‘Do you want to be my friend?’. That is how we as church ought to be. We ought to be running around town asking people if they want to be our friends and inviting them to our fellowship.



The United Church of Christ’s motto is “That That May All Be One”. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that all will be included in his kin-dom (John 17:21). The motto of Centre Church printed in your service bulletin is: “No matter who you are, and no matter where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here”. In this sanctuary we pray that all will feel welcomed and that all will have a sense of belonging. It is for us gathered here to make extra efforts to extend hospitality to others in our community who otherwise feel excluded.



As Centre Church re-launches itself as a hybrid church during the next six weeks and as the Long-Range Planning Team continues with us to discern our church's future ministry, may we realize as a people of faith that 'the only thing we have to exclude is exclusion itself'.⁵ We are a Just Peace Church and an Open and Affirming Church where *all belong*. In the future, let our church be physically accessible to all who seek to know God and let our church include all of Creation in our proclamation and living-out of Jesus' gospel.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"

⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."