

## Holy Welcome

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Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23  
Psalm 146  
James 2:1-17  
Mark 7:24-37

Today's scriptures challenge former and current boundaries. Jesus and the Syrophenician woman are both crossing lines. Jesus has dared to enter Tyre, and in doing so he has crossed the tracks into impure territory. It is in this gentile territory that he is approached by a woman, who should not be speaking publicly to a man let alone a man of another faith. Not only does she speak to Jesus she asks for his help, and then when he doesn't readily offer it she challenges him in front of others. Whether Jesus had stated he would not help her was because he wanted to make a point, or whether the woman changed his mind we are not sure. What we do know is this story shows us God is much greater than humanly created boundaries. This story challenges even Jesus to a greater acceptance of people from another culture, status and faith.

James challenges us to the same sort of behaviour. He does so not by giving us something new but by going back to the central teaching of our faith. "Love your neighbour as yourself." James calls the reader to apply this commandment to our everyday lives. Craig Koester wrote an excellent commentary on this passage. He points out that James puts us in an uncomfortable position by

"pointing out that if you really believe in Jesus, you presumably believe that the commandment to love one's neighbor is important. And if you believe that, then why would you be so solicitous toward those above you on the social scale and indifferent toward those below you?"

Koester goes on to say "James has a disconcerting way of pressing the question. He assumes that people can rationalize remaining comfortably within the confines of their social class. He assumes that people might think, "Well, ok, I see your point. But I do pretty well on the whole, so don't bother me with this. I'll try to keep most of the Ten Commandments and let the rest go." James wonders, "So which commandments don't count? Adultery is ok if you don't commit murder?"

This brings him to the heart of the matter, which is a notion of faith that is too small (James 2:14-17). If faith is reduced to saying a few words like "I believe," then the expression of faith can be reduced to a few words like telling a homeless person, "Have a nice day." For James, faith begins with a word—the Word of God that gives us new life, as he said earlier (1:18). And if that Word from God gives people life, then those who live out that Word extend life to others. Faith is what is active in a person's life, actively giving life to you and to those around you. If it is not active, it is not faith."<sup>1</sup> If you are hearing the message from James as rather harsh and graceless remember this is the same author who tells us God gives to us generously. He however is calling us to give

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<sup>1</sup> Koester Craig R. Commentary on James 2:1-17 [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)

generously just as God has given us. The good news of grace is not for us alone but for all of creation.

Are we people of Holy Welcome? It is true that here in Canada we may not have the same boundaries or prejudices as there are in other countries, or in biblical times but we would be amiss to think we do not discriminate. It is true that we as a church and people seek to help when we can but I do think we need to look at the reality that we as humans have a natural tendency to stereotype and marginalize those who are different from us. The challenge of the gospel is for us to resist this ‘natural’ tendency and to work towards inclusion, understanding and empowerment of all. In fact we are called to do it in such a way that others take notice.

If we are honest most of us would have to admit we discriminate, if not blatantly, then subtly. “We give favour to those who are like us, and gossip about, or outright reject, those who are different. We find it all too easy to stand in judgement on others, and yet we each know the pain of being discriminated against. How different our communities would be if we could just learn the difficult lesson of acceptance and understanding – giving people the freedom to be who they are, and loving them as Christ does. This applies to our family relationships, our political differences with others, our theological disagreements in the church and to every sphere in which we live.”<sup>2</sup>

As proverbs tells us the rich and the poor, all of creation have in common God as our maker. “Depending on one's social position, this proverb inspires either humility or hope. We are not what we have. Our worth is not based on our bank account. We are, at the most basic level, creatures, fashioned alike by God, the creator of all. When we by chance "meet together"—the janitor and the CEO, the homeless man and the lawyer walking by, the hotel maid and the well-to-do vacationer—we can, if we have eyes to see, recognize in each other the face of our brother or sister.”<sup>3</sup>

And it is as our eyes are opened to this truth that all creation will be healed. It is in the recognition that God is a God for all that we will be opened to live fully. As Jesus heals the man who could not hear or speak he says Ephphatha “Be opened” and as he did that the people around him could not help but share the good news of this Holy healing and Holy Welcome.

God is calling us today “Ephphatha” be opened. Be open to show love and care to all creation. Be opened to recognize where you discriminate, and open those borders, crossing over to Grace. In this place I have seen grace and joy offered as people walk through the door on a Sunday morning, and during the week. I have seen flexibility and grace in worship and leadership and yet I believe The Holy is always calling us to more.

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<sup>2</sup> Van de Laar, John. Sacredise – Seeking to be fully Alive [sacredise.blogspot.com](http://sacredise.blogspot.com)

<sup>3</sup> Schifferdecker, Kathryn, commentary on alternate first reading [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)

As we pause together ask yourself where God is longing for you to be opened. It may be that your eyes need to be opened to the love and grace God longs for you to know for yourself or your neighbour. It may be a boundary you have set that you feel God longing to heal in a relationship. Or God may be calling you to break down a barrier of discrimination? Let's ask ourselves what is God calling us to as a church – where are we to more deeply embrace a life of Holy Welcome? Let us pray.