

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
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Healed and Included, or Included and Healed?  
James 2: 8, 14-17, Mark 7:24-37

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? That question is like the question I asked in the title to this meditation. Healed and included, or included and healed?

Today we heard two healing stories from the Gospel According to Mark. The people that Jesus healed were unclean by every standard of both his culture and religion, and the cultures and religions of the area. They were not people of culture and learning, not part of the elite classes of Greeks or Romans, not powerful military figures. They did not worship in the temples or pay their tithes. They were poor, not property owners, marginally employed, or even unemployable. On top of that they were mentally ill, blind, lame, deaf, or diseased.

Because of this, they were excluded from society, from government, from religious ceremonies and sacred places. They were excluded from participation in the simple things of everyday life- shopping in the marketplace, work- except for begging and relying on charity, living in community, walking in the square, being seen in public places. They all came to Jesus seeking healing. But to be healed of their illness, would also mean that they could be included.

Today's healing stories are particularly interesting for several reasons. If you remember, when we started studying the stories from Mark, Jesus was

traveling around to Jewish towns healing people. In fact, he even went to his hometown. But there were problems along the way.

Where ever he went in the predominantly Jewish region of Galilee, the leaders of the temple, the Pharisees, began challenging Jesus and his teachings. He touched, taught, healed and included those that they have taught are unclean, the people they have excluded. The Pharisees thought, and rightly so, that he was challenging their teachings and authority.

Remember also, that the people in Jesus' hometown also challenged him. Who does he think he is? The teaching and healing Jesus was able to do among them was limited by their attitudes.

Today, Jesus leaves Galilee and travels to the Gentile territories of the Syrophonecians (Tyre) and the Greeks (the Decapolis). The first interesting thing we are told is that Jesus leaves Galilee in the hope of being anonymous. Perhaps, he is trying to get away from the challenges. Yet, it seems that he cannot hide.

Jesus is outside of Galilee among foreigners. Yet, even here Jesus ends up healing- Gentiles, people who are doubly excluded from the Jewish community. The little girl and the man are not only diseased, they are unclean because they are not part of Jesus' religion, his culture, his nationality or his ethnicity. One of them is even female, represented by a female! When Jesus heals them of illness, they may also become a functioning part of their community.

Yet, we also know situations where people who are left out become healed after they are included. Some colleagues and I were talking about a phenomenon often seen in hospice care. In order to get hospice services, a doctor has to certify that you are near the end of your life- you have to be dying to get help. Then, when the hospice nurses and nurses aides, and chaplains and equipment all arrive, several things happen. Medical staff confer on medication, nutritional needs are assessed, help with basic life skills is given, and care is offered to the family.

When all this service is provided, it can often happen that the person's physical, mental, and spiritual health, social skills and attitudes so improve, you would not know that they were dying. They are given what they need to live the transition time of their life with dignity. They are included back in to life. They are not cured, but they are healed- made whole.

Getting back to the people Jesus healed- we can see this chicken or the egg question. Which came first? Did Jesus heal them and then include them, or were they healed because they were included? These people were invisible to their society. Yet Jesus recognized them, noticed, paid attention to them, talked and listened to them, even included them in his entourage. They may or may not have been fully included in their community after they were healed. But they were made whole, they knew they were included in Kingdom of God.

But there is something in the story of the Syrophonecian woman that really bothers me, and perhaps it bothers you too. When she asks Jesus to heal her daughter, no she begs him, falling at his feet, Jesus turns her away. Would the Jesus we know exclude anyone? Yet here it is- he says the food for the children (Israel) should not be given to the dogs. He is calling this woman and her daughter dogs! Dogs were unclean animals! Dogs were never allowed in the house, much less given food meant for children. And it was a dirty slang term for Gentiles.

Yet the woman insisted on healing for her daughter. She was willing to humble herself to beg, to allow Jesus to treat her as unclean- to even call her a dog, so that he would see her, so that he would heal her daughter, so that he would know she was not to be put aside, ignored or excluded. But, here in the story we also see the use of irony and verbal jousting. Remember that Jesus often took the words of the Pharisees and turned them, using their own words against them.

In spite of the racial slur, she replies respectfully. In the actual Greek words, “Sir”, she says, “even the puppies (not dogs) under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” In the same story in Matthew she says, “even the puppies eat the crumbs that fall from their Master’s table.”

She uses his slang, but twists it from dogs to puppies. Puppies were dogs and unclean, but were allowed the table scraps. She may also be reminding him of God’s commandment requiring harvesters to leave some grain behind for the poor

and the foreigner. Using Jesus' own words and tradition, the woman insists that she and her daughter are already included by God as one of God's people. She insists that even Jesus can not exclude her from God's kingdom.

Is this story historically factual? Did Jesus have to be taught by this woman that God's kingdom is inclusive of all? Or was this story put in Mark's and Matthew's Gospels because the early church questioned whether the Gospel was for Gentiles as well as Jews? Matthew's story is expanded and we can imagine that Jesus used this situation as a teaching moment for his disciples. We cannot know for sure. Yet this story and others make clear that Jesus' good news of God's love is not limited by structures and taboos of society and religion that separate people.

In Jesus' time you had to be clean to be included. Jesus said that it is not what goes into a person that makes them unclean, what is outside does not matter. What matters is the condition of the heart. It is clear: all people are to be healed and fed and included in the kingdom of God!

The dictionary says inclusion is the addition of somebody, or the presence of somebody in a group. Exclusion is to leave out of consideration, to prevent from entering. Are we inclusive or exclusive? Look around you. Who is not here? We may argue, we do not exclude! Yet, not excluding is not the same as being

inclusive. Inclusion is the act of including: To take in as an equal part, as a full member. Inclusion is an intentional act. It is active not passive.

We are called by God to ask: Who have we not intentionally included? Who have we “forgotten” to invite? We have to look at whose we say we are, at the way we worship, the ministries we have and do not have, by our outreach or lack thereof?

And consider: Who will be your next Pastor? Narthex pictures show middle aged and old white men. Now you have welcomed a middle aged white woman. Will you welcome an older black woman, a younger Hispanic man, a gay pastor, an immigrant, a pastor who uses a wheelchair or a pastor who is blind? We have eminently talented UCC pastors who fit each of these descriptions.

Inclusion is to make part of the whole- in other words we are not whole unless we include the people we have excluded or those we have failed to include, unless we actively invite. Without them we lack (like soup lacks that salt- lacks flavor). We need something that is missing. When we include, we are made complete, we are made whole and healed. Amen.