



## Jesus and his Unpopular Friends

Text: Luke 8

*Sermon Preached by Rev. Kenneth R. Gallinger*

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There are a lot of really weird people living in downtown Toronto. I suppose I might as well say, before you do, that Nancy and I are among them – we live in the St. Lawrence Market area, and make our own particular contribution to the urban mosaic. Because we love the downtown vibe, we often go out walking in the evening – and the weirdoes are everywhere. They walk along, singing their happy songs, or sit on street corners talking to their dogs...even when they don't actually have dogs. They camp out on heat grates, begging for whatever they can find – recently I had a pan-handler tell me, with apparent conviction, that if I didn't have cash, he would be happy to accept VISA, MasterCard or American Express. Some are buskers, who make a living by swallowing an inflated balloon and drawing it back out through their nose. Some hang out in front of the various downtown missions. In the worst cases, they stagger out in front of your car in traffic, or sit on the market wall, across from your condo, screaming at the moon until the paramedics and cops arrive. They wear a wild variety of costumes, some outrageous, many hilarious. A few years ago, Nancy and I toured a couple of recently arrived refugees from Africa around downtown Toronto; it happened to be a couple of days before Halloween, and we were trying to explain the difference between people who were wearing Halloween costumes, and those who were dressed as usual; we weren't very successful, and left our refugee-guests wondering whether it might have been safer to stay in Africa. Walking the streets of downtown Toronto is many things – but it is rarely boring.

Weird people are nothing new. Our scripture lessons this morning tell two stories of Jesus dealing with people that in his day would have been considered unapproachable. In the first, Jesus is confronted by a certifiable lunatic; Luke describes him graphically as "a man from the city who was possessed by devils; for a long time he had been living with no clothes on, not in a house, but in a tomb". We're told that, upon seeing Jesus, he "gave a shout, fell at his feet, and cried out at the top of his lungs, 'I implore you; do not torture me.'" I'm pretty sure I've met this guy on Jarvis Street. The second story, following immediately upon the first, is much more subtle. The outcast in the second story is a woman, but a woman cursed with the unforgivable affliction of her day – she was menstruating, and her period had lasted uninterrupted for years. It goes without saying that for any woman, today as then, such a situation is far more than a mere inconvenience; it has health and social implications that are troubling at best. But in those days, a menstruating woman was, by definition, unclean. The law of the Hebrew people declared that: "Whenever a woman has a discharge of blood from her body, she is unclean for seven days. Anyone who touches her will be unclean. Anything she lies on will be unclean; anyone who touches her bed, or anything she has sat on, must wash clothing and body and will still be unclean until evening. If a woman has a prolonged discharge of blood, she will be in the same state of uncleanness as during her monthly period. The man who has intercourse with such a woman has laid bare the source of her blood, and both of them shall be outlawed from their people". So the law was clear, and this

woman who approached Jesus, we're told, had been in this state of uncleanness for 12 – count them 12(!) – years. Jesus was touched by her, and she was made whole.

Luke's Gospel is full of stories in which Jesus spends time with untouchables – weird ones, outcasts, the derelicts of his society. Amongst his cast of undesirables are a tax-collector (always a societal pariah), some politicians, a bunch of children, several foreigners, people with leprosy, a lawyer, some gentiles, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, and, when particular categories no longer suffice, a catch-all group that Luke merely describes as “a bunch of sinners”. For the next several weeks in our Sunday School, the kids are going to be studying how Jesus relates to these people, and because I don't want your kids to be smarter than you, I thought it would be worth looking at that question here in church today as well.

It's not a question that's difficult to answer – in fact, one word is enough. Regardless of whether he was dealing with children or lepers, tax collectors or indigents like himself, Jesus always and without exception treats them with *respect*. Now respect is very different from two other qualities with which it's often confused. Firstly, respect is not the same as sympathy or for that matter, pity. Sympathy is a quality that's born from the notion that “I'm alright, and you're not”. Sympathy can sound like respect, “Oh, I know what you're going through”, and so on – but lurking in the background behind every sympathetic act is the conviction that you are in some way vulnerable, and I'm not. So I, therefore, have something to give to you, and whether that something is flowers or a hug, and whether or not it is welcome or accepted, nevertheless, it is not the same as respect. After all, what creature on earth would we have more sympathy for than a beaten dog – every journalist knows that beaten dog stories evoke far more sympathy than stories of starving people. But we don't respect a beaten dog – we just feel sorry for it.

Secondly, respect is not the same as tolerance. And this is a very important distinction in a society like ours which names itself tolerant, and prides itself on that quality. Tolerance is a funny thing; in many ways, it's a vice that poses as a virtue. I first thought about this a couple of decades ago, at a time when The United Church of Canada distributed a study paper about our often-flawed relationship with Jews in Canada. The paper, as I remember, called upon Christians to remember their shared heritage with Judaism, and encouraged Christians to develop a new level of tolerance in dealing with the Jews in our midst. Not surprisingly in hindsight, but astonishingly at the time, many Jews were infuriated by our attempt at benign tolerance. Many Jews said, “we don't want to be *tolerated* as if we were some kind of blight or plague that you've decided you can live with. We want to be respected as sisters and brothers of faith, and as fully contributing members of Canadian society.” Of course, and that seems so obvious now. What is less obvious is why we continue, as a country and as individuals, to celebrate our much-vaunted tolerance in dealing with other groups of unpopular people – Muslims, blacks, the poor, or whomever. Tolerance is, obviously, better than intolerance. But both qualities are born of the same perception: that somehow those unpopular people are in some way less fully human, less fully entitled, and less fully privileged than we are. Whether we choose to be tolerant or intolerant, we *begin* with the assumption that these people are less worthy than we.

Contrast that, then, with the respectful reaction of Jesus in dealing with the troublesome people in this morning's stories. The first man is clearly a lunatic – a raving, drooling, screaming psychopath. And when he approaches Jesus, the normal response that should have ensued was to run – that, after all, was what

everyone else did. Instead, Jesus says to the man, “what’s your name?” When was the last time any of us asked a street person in downtown Toronto what their name was? I personally don’t remember *ever* having done that. To ask someone their name is to concede that they are a human being – that they have parents, a story, a place in the world. To ask someone their name is to respect them as a human being. It’s far easier to deal with unpopular people if we can keep them as categories – street people, blue collar folk, blacks, children. “What’s your name” says Jesus – and that’s called respect. And it leads directly, in the story, to a change in the man’s life forever. Then, in the second story, this unclean, desperate, untouchable woman dares to touch the cloak of the rabbi. She should, and according to the law very well could, have been stoned to death. But Jesus turns to her and calls her “my daughter”. It is a term of intimacy quite unimaginable to those around him. “My daughter” – and then Jesus says something even more remarkable. “*Your faith* has made you whole”. Do you see what’s happening here? Jesus doesn’t say “My power fixed you up – so go sing my praises”. No – to a woman – and remember that in those days women were not even permitted into the inner court of the temple – and a menstruating and therefore unclean woman who was not permitted within 100 paces of a holy man like Jesus -- he says “*Your faith* has made you whole.” And that is called respect.

Respect for unpopular people is, of course, not always easy. Respect is born, after all, from an understanding that people who fit into these categories we consider unpopular are just as fully human as we are, and that means that they have, amongst them, all the virtues *and all the vices* that we do. Many years ago, my son Matt, who is now an ordained minister, acted as the wedding host at one of my former congregations. During a wedding, the photographer had been fully appraised of the house rules regarding pictures, but once the wedding started, he chose to do what many others have done – to ignore the rules completely and do exactly whatever he wanted to. As the service proceeded, and the exchange of the rings drew near, I saw the photographer walking directly up the centre aisle, and positioning his large backside directly between the couple and the congregation – he was ready to get “the shot”. What he couldn’t see, but I could, was my son Matt (who was about 15 at the time, and was furious, in the way a 15 year old can be, at being ignored) sneaking up the aisle behind him. At precisely the moment the rings were exchanged, the photog lifted the camera, and Matt stepped between him and the couple, blocking the shot completely with his body and smiling broadly. The photographer was furious, and after the wedding stormed back in to Matt and me, and said to Matt “You only did that because I’m black and you’re racist”. And Matt smiled back, and said, “No, I did it because you’re an idiot. And the fact that you’re a black idiot doesn’t matter to me”. Actually, I don’t think Matt used the word, “idiot” – I believe that he referred to a sphinctorially-controlled lower body part – but the message is the same.

It can be difficult to respect unpopular people. They have amongst them all the same traits as the rest of us; but perhaps because they haven’t been to the finest finishing schools, or perhaps because they have different cultural traditions, or perhaps because they are very young, or perhaps because they have given up caring, those traits we find difficult are often unfiltered amongst these people. Some street people are aggressive and in your face, and we feel afraid. Some disabled people are self centred and unpleasant, and we don’t know how to respond ... I can’t tell you how often I’ve been almost run over by people in wheel chairs on Front St. who assume that, because they are disabled, they have some *a priori* right to the asphalt I’m standing on. Some Muslims bomb planes, and we really wish they’d quit doing that. Some Evangelical Christians are arrogant and superior in a way that makes us nuts. And some children are noisy, prone to tantrums and snotty

noses. You may, incidentally, be surprised to hear me include children in this category of “unpopular friends of Jesus”, but Luke, uniquely, includes them in his Gospel, and for my part, I’ve had more fights with more people over my years of ministry about the place of children in the church than about any other group. In 1967, when I was the 18 year old Sunday School Superintendent at Rideau Park United Church in Ottawa, I had a screaming fight with the then-minister about my desire to bring children into church for a particular worship service. I was told, “No, they are too noisy and disruptive, and will distract people.” I brought them in anyways, and let him fume. That’s a battle that has never gone away during the 43 years between then and now, so I feel quite comfortable including this category of children – at least the sub-category of “other people’s children” – in this list. And I was delighted when those who direct our Sunday School program for these weeks did so as well, entirely without consultation with me.

Yes, it can be difficult – very difficult indeed – to live respectfully with the unpopular friends of Jesus. But I suggest to you, as I have many times before, that our ability to do so is one criterion we can use to measure our success or failure as a Christian congregation, and our success or failure as individual Christians. This is a congregation that loves “metrics” – we love to be able to measure things. So let me suggest this, then, as one of the metre-sticks we use going forward is assessing how we do. How respectful – not tolerant, not sympathetic, but respectful – are we of people who are not like us?

Between the years 1985 and 1993, I was one of the ministers at Richmond Hill United Church in the north end of this city. Richmond Hill, like so many congregations these days, was a difficult place to do ministry – so much so that, if my memory serves me correctly, the 8 year ministry which my colleague Leslee Alfano and I shared there was the longest ministry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and none since have outlived us. Leslee and I may not be good, but we are durable. In any event, Richmond Hill United was a tough place. But it was also, in many ways, a wonderful place. One of the things that made RHUC special was the group of mentally, and often multiply-disabled adults from the nearby L’Arche community who worshipped with us regularly. Each Sunday, between 3 and a dozen or more folks from L’Arche came down to RHUC for the service – and they joined in other congregational activities as well. Some of these folks were kind, gentle, lovely people. And some were not. One very big man, each week, would decide that he had to go to the bathroom, and his timing was impeccable. Right in the middle of the sermon, when I had reached the zenith of oratorical excellence, and had everyone hanging by a thread in eager anticipation of my conclusion, George would get up, lumber across directly in front of the pulpit, wave to everyone, and disappear into the handicapped bathroom. There he would stay, flushing noisily and repeatedly, until the middle of the pastoral prayer when, having successfully peed and feeling enormously better, he would re-emerge smiling broadly, cross again in front of the pulpit, wave to everyone again, and reduce my unspeakably-moving prayer to rubble. Another woman took it as her special responsibility to scribble her name across every page of the guest book every week – and the more we tried to hide the book, and the more we explained to Helen that this was not appropriate behavior, the bigger and blacker she wrote on every page. It wasn’t that Helen didn’t understand – it was just that she was being a pain in the butt. It is not always easy to respect the unpopular friends of Jesus. They can be unfiltered, unrefined, noisy, disruptive, smelly, and a royal pain. Because they often haven’t learned to cloak their negative behavior in the cloth of manners or politesse, or because they sometimes simply don’t care to do so, it is often easier to push them aside, or feel sorry for them or, when we’re feeling magnanimous, to tolerate them. But the thing that made Richmond Hill United Church, special, and offset at

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least some of the things that made it so difficult, was the profound respect with which those people from L'Arche were made a real part of that congregation.

This is the stuff your kids will be talking about in Sunday School these next few weeks. It is a good conversation. How did Jesus deal with people who those around him considered unpopular? And how do we, who are the body and blood of Christ in our time and place, deal with those same people?