

# HOW WIDE IS GOD'S DOOR?

Mark 7:24-30  
Acts 10: 34-48

Broadview Community United Church of Christ  
May 28, 2006  
Rev. Gail Crouch

As a child of 7 I sat spellbound in my chair as the young, passionate missionary talked about her call to “convert the heathen in Africa to Christ.” Just returned from her first five years of missionary work in western Africa, she regaled us with stories of how primitive and “lost” the people were in the villages where she lived and worked. She spoke of children and adults who were doomed to die in misery, their souls unsaved, because no one had “brought Christ to them. And she quoted the scripture from John, “*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father (to God) except through me.*” She urged us again and again to pray that these heathen would leave their wrong and harmful religious practices and accept Christ as their savior.

For several weeks after her visit I prayed nightly for those heathen children who needed Christ. Although the missionary had not directly said they would go to hell, I managed to convince myself that they would unless the Christian missionaries could save them. I worried about them. I prayed they would hear about and believe in Jesus.

Expressing my concern one day to my minister father he gently said, “Even if they are not Christians, God loves them and maybe they love God and simply use different words. We do not know everything about God.” Now I was really confused. Were they going to hell or not?

But as children can do, I quickly moved on to more interesting and familiar concerns. It was, however, the first time I can remember questioning the Christian belief that *only* through Jesus Christ can one know or understand God and be saved.

\* \* \* \*

For too many centuries, our Christian faith has held the belief that only by accepting Christ as the son of God, can we know God, be welcomed into heaven and saved from damnation. The belief has been that God's door is narrow and only Christians can truly enter.

Our United States of America has called itself a Christian country and that faith has permeated much of our public life. But times, they are a' changing, and now people of other faiths no longer live only in far away places. In our country people of other faiths are everywhere.

Our current next door neighbors to the south are Somali Muslims who worship at the Mosque near Northgate. Our neighbors to the north are Cambodians who practice a form of Buddhism. No longer can I, a Christian, view Muslims or Buddhists as heathens in far-

off lands. These people of other faiths have names and faces – and they live next door to me.

As we in the United Church of Christ seek to understand what it means to be a biblically rooted, liberal, progressively inclusive Christian church, we struggle with how we live out that vision in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic world. And I think part of that difficulty comes because of the exclusionary approaches adopted by Christianity over the past several hundred years – the beliefs I heard as a child from that missionary to Africa.

The Gospel lesson this morning is an intriguing and disturbing one. And it reflects some of the struggles of both Jesus' time and the early Christian church. The first Christians were all Jews. Jesus was a Jew. So the question of whether a non-Jew could become Christian was one that perplexed the early church. The resistance of those early Jewish-Christians is remarkably similar to our current questions of religious pluralism.

In this story, Jesus goes to Tyre, a region that lay in the province of Syria. Mark says Jesus did not know anyone there. Perhaps he was tired from his preaching, teaching, healing ministries and ready for a rest. We might surmise that his personal mood is one of "leave me alone for awhile."

But word of his presence has spread and here comes a woman whose daughter has an "unclean spirit," the term often used for what was likely a form of mental illness or perhaps a medical condition that included seizures. The woman has heard of Jesus' healing powers and desperately wants her own child to be healed.

But there is a problem – as a Gentile, a non-Jew – she is held in contempt by the Jews. There is so much bias and prejudice towards gentiles that hurtful taunts are used, in this case, gentiles are referred to as dogs. This woman knows that many Jews consider her a dog. And the shocking fact of this scripture is that Jesus responds to the woman in this very hurtful way as he says, "*Let the children (the Jews) be fed first for it is not fair to take the children's food (i.e. the benefits of Jesus' ministry) and throw it to the dogs.*" What a scandalous and harsh response on the part of Jesus! He bluntly names the belief that Jews have priority in the divine household of God and her faith is not as acceptable. The door to God is too narrow for her to enter.

This certainly does not sound like the Jesus we know – that inclusive teacher who broke bread with tax collectors, prostitutes and others that society rejected. So what do we do with this scripture and others that claim only Christianity is the way to God's saving grace?

If we look at when and how the gospels were written it helps our understanding. Scholars believe that the early church was struggling to survive in a hostile environment. The Gospels were written some 70-90 years after the death of Jesus, and they were responding to critical issues of their time and place in that early church. One of those debates was whether or not Jewish Christians had more favor with God than Gentile Christians. This scripture seems to support the belief that Jesus placed the Jews in higher

standing with God. But everything else we know about Jesus, his inclusive and accepting nature, makes this particular scripture suspect. Many scholars believe it is highly doubtful that Jesus actually said these words to the gentile woman. But even if that is true, there is something to be learned from this story.

The woman's reply to Jesus makes her a model of persistent faith. She could easily have taken offense at Jesus' portrayal of her as a dog. But her tenacious love for her daughter gives her the courage to come back at Jesus. "*Sir, even the dogs kept under the table can eat the children's crumbs.* That is, even we non-Jews can be fed by your healing powers. And Jesus softens and says, "*Because of your faith, you may go, your daughter has been healed.*" This woman becomes the spokesperson, the voice that claims the healing power of God for those who live outside religious boundaries. In one sense, this woman facilitates Jesus' movements across boundaries and makes a statement that God's love is available to more people than we may think possible.

And what about that scripture where Jesus says, "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to God except through me?*" One new way to look at that is to move from the idea that Jesus named **himself** as the way to salvation, to believing that Jesus came to point the way to God, a God who is as caring as a loving parent. Many scholars believe that Jesus was not setting himself up as the gatekeeper. What he was saying is that the God he preached about – a God of inclusive and radical love and grace – was the God all peoples needed.

And our scripture from Acts affirms this broader understanding. Peter begins preaching after experiencing an amazing vision. He had seen a large sheet filled with all the unclean foods forbidden to Jews. A voice commands him to eat those foods and Peter strongly objects. "*I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.*" And he hears a voice saying, "What God has made clean you must not call profane." And Peter interprets this to mean that even gentiles, those same persons referred to as dogs, are included in God's love. So he begins his sermon with these words: "*I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation everyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.*"

If my Muslim and Buddhist neighbors are acceptable to God, what right have I to state that they must convert to Christianity to be saved? Theologian and world religions expert, Huston Smith has used a helpful image. Religions, he says, are like a stained glass window whose sections divide the light of the same sun into different colors. Perhaps the different colors of my Muslim and Buddhist neighbor's faiths are simply different expressions of my God – seen in another light.

The CrossWalk America Program has been in our bulletin announcements. This is a group of progressive, liberal Christians, led by a UCC pastor from Phoenix, who are determined to talk about Christianity in a way that is faithful to the inclusive love that Jesus taught and lived. A group of walkers are going from Phoenix to Washington D.C. and along the way talking with churches, small town local newspapers and radio stations,

offering an alternative understanding of Christianity. They express their love and theology in the way Jesus did: Love of God, Love of Neighbor, and Love of Self. They walk, supported by many Christians in other states and places, including numerous churches here in the Seattle area. I want to share with you their “statement of faith,” the Phoenix Affirmations. (*These can be found on their website, [www.CrossWalkAmerica.org](http://www.CrossWalkAmerica.org)*)

What is interesting is that the walkers assumed the most controversial affirmation would be #5, particularly the part dealing with sexual orientation. And it has engendered some lively debate. But the affirmation about which there is strongest disagreement is #1 - there may be other paths to God. The folks along the route are, for the most part, convinced that only through Jesus is salvation possible.

The Sunday morning class is reading *If Grace is True*, by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland. Their thesis is that God saves every human being. So they say,

*“If you believe God loves and will save every person, you can’t claim redemption as an exclusively Christian experience. Salvation is no longer the sole possession of a specific religion, culture, or denomination. Salvation belongs to God.”*

Being accepting of other faiths does not mean we give up our allegiance to the Christian faith. We continue to express our belief that Jesus is the incarnation of God, the way we best understand God’s love and grace. And Jesus calls us to be inclusive in our love for others. Dr. Lloyd Averill, a UCC pastor and theologian, says: *“If I cannot love the God my neighbor worships, I must nevertheless love my neighbor. If I cannot adopt her faith, I must nevertheless respect her faithfulness.”*

We can continue to tell the stories of our Christian faith while learning something new as we share them with other faiths. If we present the Christian faith as *invitation*, not *admonition*, we point to the light of Jesus, not the darkness of other faiths, and learn to listen to each other. We know from the stories of Jesus that God often speaks to us in the voice of the stranger, the one who is unlike us. How wide is God’s door? Wide enough for love to invite us all into community, into relationship with each other and God. For no doorway is wide enough to hold all of God’s amazing love. Amen.