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CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

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Mark 7: 14-27

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Opening Up as Spiritual Practice

The passage today makes most Jesus loving Christians more than a little uncomfortable. It portrays him in a most unflattering light – an ethnocentric light to be exact. That is, Jesus is crystal clear that his mission is to his own people, the Jews, and not to any outsiders. Jesus has gone northwest to the coast, who knows, perhaps for a little R and R after getting news that his mentor John the Baptist has been beheaded. Who wouldn't need a little R and R after that! This was a time to regroup and discern his own future. Maybe he simply doesn't want to be bothered while he's on his break. I certainly know how that feels. Perhaps this explains his grumpiness. We all have our off days.

However, there is a distinct possibility that it's more than that. When the Syro-Phoenician woman approaches him with a request to heal his daughter, he may actually have wanted no part of dealing with her precisely because she's a foreigner. The conversation doesn't cast Jesus in divine light. This is why most biblical scholars assume its historical accuracy. The fact that editors *didn't* change it is the strongest indicator that it's probably a true story. Here's what Jesus says, if you didn't catch it:

He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Mark 7:27).

The children, you realize, are his own people, the Jews. And the dogs he is referring to are the gentiles. Hmm... Remember, she was asking – no, it says she was "begging" – on behalf of her ill daughter. It seems a just a tad insensitive.

Why this story is so difficult for us to accept is that Jesus has been historically presented as God in human form. Can God have an off day? Then, beginning in the late 19th century, theologians starting noticing inconsistencies in the various accounts of Jesus life in the New Testament. They concluded that much of the presentation of Jesus as God's only Son didn't originate with Jesus, but with writers of the gospel. The humanity of Jesus began to be emphasized over his divinity. But even here, he was a kind of uber-human, ethically superior to the rest of us, and certainly more loving and compassionate. But in this story – and there are really no other stories like it in the New Testament – Jesus comes off as a bit of a xenophobe – someone who dislikes foreign people, their cultures and their customs. Whether you emphasize Jesus' divinity or his full humanity, he falls just a tad short of the mark in his initial treatment of this poor woman and her daughter.

The foreign mother challenges Jesus: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus is impressed by her retort. We're not told

what turned him around. In the most favorable light, you might say that what opened him up was her humility. Her daughter's wellbeing far outweighed any historical animosities between Jews and Gentiles. Is it possible that Jesus was opened up himself by her vulnerability? Did Jesus learn something from her capacity to transcend ethnic rivalries by going to an outsider Jew from Israel for help?

But you see the problem don't you? Implicit in this question is the possibility that Jesus himself was not fully realized as a human being – that he had growing to do. His was an evolutionary journey, just like your journey and mine. Is this kind of thinking even compatible with Christian faith?

This is going to require a little theology. I promise to keep it comprehensible. First point: being a Christian is not necessarily the same as believing that Jesus was God's only son, or even believing that Jesus was divine. To understand this you need to make a distinction between "Christ" and "Jesus". Christ was not Jesus' last name, like Sanguin is my last name. The Christ is a title, a translation from the Greek word "Christos". Which itself is a translation of the Hebrew word for Messiah, or the anointed one, the one anointed by God to do a task. Kings were anointed by God, as were priests and prophets. They were all anointed by Spirit to do a particular task on behalf of God and the people. Our Jewish friends are still waiting for the arrival of their Messiah. Over the centuries, Christians identified Jesus as the one and only Messiah.

But what if we expand the notion

of Messiah or Christ beyond a human being? What if we were to posit that it's more like a force, a power, or to get mathematical, more like a cosmic algorithm¹, a pattern that is laid down at the beginning of creation, emanating from the Creator's very being? What if the Christ is a sacred pattern by which the universe evolves at all levels, geological, biological, and in humans, morally, cognitively, and spiritually? The prologue of John's gospel hints at this. "In the beginning was the Logos (or the Word), and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God. This logos or word took form in Jesus and Jesus was the light of the universe". Jesus was the light of the cosmos because he was uniquely open to the pattern of the Logos or Word unfolding within him. He saw his life as an expression of the Logos. Subsequent generations of Christians called him "the Christ", the anointed one for this reason. He was anointed with the power of Logos, the creative, ordering principle of the cosmos.

Let me take this one step further. I want to suggest that this cosmic algorithm, this divine pattern, this Word, this Logos (in my mind the words are interchangeable), is evolution itself. From the womb and the mind of the Holy One at the beginning of creation emerged the evolutionary pattern, which would repeat itself under the right conditions in molecules, cells, organisms, plants, animals and humans.

The reason the first generation of followers of Jesus called him "the Christ" was that he was open to the evolutionary

¹ I am grateful to Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God*, (2009) for applying the idea of algorithm to the Logos.

pattern of the universe that was laid down from the beginning of creation 13.7 billion years ago. This implies, of course, that Jesus evolved. To say this is not to diminish Jesus in anyway. Far from it, it actually dignifies Jesus by establishing him as the one through whom the sacred evolutionary powers of the universe were at play. To gather in Jesus' name, therefore is to open to the same sacred pattern that animated Jesus. Are you with me? And this is what makes him divine, his conscious openness to the pattern of evolution that I'm calling the Word or Logos of God. Jesus evolved.

Look at your own life and ask yourself whether this evolutionary impulse is not the most fundamental dynamic at play. For a long while, I was satisfied being a jock – the girls seemed to appreciate it, I won lots of awards – it worked for me. Then, unbidden (where do these ideas come from?), I started asking myself questions about the meaning of life while at university. There had to be more. Then I became a born-again Christian. After three years, I started saying to myself, “there must be more than this.” There's nothing wrong with being a jock or with being a born-again Christian, but I ask you, what is this impulse to go beyond where you are at in life. What is this intuition of More? So I became a “progressive/liberal” Christian, and that was great for a while, but I sensed that it didn't really get at the heart of the matter.

I've just described my evolutionary journey along a single line of intelligence – spiritual. But I could do the same with other lines like cognitive, relational, ecological, moral, aesthetic, meaning, values, self. Same story, different lines. I just think that this is how God makes

Godself known in creation, as the evolutionary impulse to grow towards increased fullness of being and freedom of being.

So, first disentangle Jesus and Christ. Then celebrate that Jesus was one who was supremely open to the Logos or Christ consciousness, which I've called the evolutionary algorithm. This enables us to see that being “in Christ” is being open to our own evolution, in solidarity with the leader of our lineage, Jesus of Nazareth. Far from being shocked that Jesus life was an evolving journey, this is the very foundation of our allegiance.

Now, we return to the story in Mark's gospel and suggest that this was a moment of profound opening for Jesus. He was challenged by a foreigner around his moral line of development, to transcend his ethnocentric bias – the God's love is for “us” alone – and open to a worldcentric perspective, and acknowledge that God's circle of concern includes “all of us”, Gentiles included – not just “us” Jews. He answered the evolutionary impulse to evolve and thereby participated in God's own plan for creation.

Jesus then makes his way back home. En route there is a deaf man. Having himself been opened up by the Syro-Phoenician woman, we shouldn't be surprised by the words he uses to heal the deaf man. “Ephphatha, that is, be opened”! Having just listened deeply enough to a foreigner to evolve, he now helps other to hear with the ears of the divine.

That is the key to our evolutionary journey. These are his words to

generations of followers, including us, for 2000 years. Just keep being opened up. Never shut down. Never close your heart. Never close your mind. Don't get fixated on a particular ideology or a dogma or an unchanging truth. Don't assume that church only takes one form. More positively stated, hear the cosmic imperative, embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, to be opened up to the evolutionary impulse, the divine Logos.

We are deaf when we choose to listen only to those whose ideas, theories, beliefs and worldviews confirm our own. Prior to listening to the Syro-Phoenician woman Jesus was deaf. God comes to us as that which is outside of our comfort zone in order to open us to worlds we didn't even know existed.

In the context of this Scripture passage, the spiritual practice of being opened up involves opening to the outsider. This includes people of different nationalities, religions, and languages. We are still having trouble hearing our own indigenous people, for example. But it goes further than this. Metaphorically speaking the outsider can be your own feelings. Mat Fox was here on Tuesday evening, imploring men to be open to our grief, our sorrow, our lament, our ecstasy and our love – the only native feeling for a man in our culture is anger. And worldwide, the anger of men is a homicidal force that is destructive of both human beings and the planet. It's time for us men to do our work and evolve by opening – listening – to the foreign feelings we were not given permission to feel by the constricting definitions of masculinity when we were growing up.

Opening up to the outsider means

opening up to new perspectives. I just read a book by Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God*. He's a materialist, meaning he believes that the moral and spiritual lines of intelligence are not much more than people playing non-zero sum games with each other over time. If it works to ensure survival, and results in a win-win situation, then it's "selected" by the culture and passed on. Well, his arguments, for me, got a little tedious at times. But he's a wonderful scholar and his take on the Judeo-Christian tradition was fascinating. I learned a lot by listening to this "foreign" perspective. If we're only reading books that confirm our perspective, it's unlikely we're going to evolve.

Opening to the outsider, by listening with the ears of evolutionary intelligence, means paying attention to those closest to us, including our life partners and closest friends. In fact, it means actually seeking them out and asking them for feedback on how they are experiencing you. What? Me self-absorbed? You must be talking about somebody else. Me, withdrawn and moody? C'mon!, you can't be serious. Me, drinking a bit too much last night and dominating the conversation? Well, you can get in a fight or you can hear this feedback as very important information from how somebody who is on your side after all. It can help you evolve.

Everybody these days is seeking a direct, spiritual experience of God. Well, we can choose to do what Jesus did with his life – evolve. And as we do we are tapping into the sacred powers of this cosmos, the mind and heart of the Christ. It's a very simple practice, not easy, but simple. All we have to do is open up and

listen.