



## Exclusion and Embrace

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James 2: 1-10,14-17; Mark 7:24-37

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There is a book I enjoy dipping into every once in a while called *The Wisdom of Psychopaths*. Kevin Dutton, the author of the book, is a psychologist who suggests that while people have a certain perception that all psychopaths are serial killers, the truth is that many highly successful people can rightly be described as psychopaths.

Before I go to much further it would be good to give a broad definition of what a psychopath is. The word psychopath is the word historically applied to a particular personality disorder characterised by self-centred behaviour, fearless dominance of others and cold-heartedness. This is not a new phenomenon, the ancient Greeks spoke of a personality type that they called *The Unscrupulous Man*.

Dutton begins his book by talking about his father, who was a psychopath. His father was never violent, was always cool headed, but was somewhat ruthless when it came to his career. For example, Dutton's father came into possession of a number of calendars that had been binned because they only had eleven months, not twelve. Dutton's father didn't bat an eyelid and set about marketing these "one of a kind" 11 month calendars. He sold every last one.

Dutton summarises his father's unique perspective on life as fearless. Whereas the vast majority of people think about consequences to bad decisions, the psychopath lives in the moment and simply focusses on getting what they want here and now. This unique outlook on life can lead to tragic consequences, but more often can lead to an individual being highly successful, particularly when they pursue a career path that rewards ruthless behaviour.

Dutton recalls his father once saying, "...humans developed fear as a survival mechanism to protect against predators...but you don't see too many sabretooth tigers prowling around...do you?"

I'm not sure that being completely fearless is the next stage of human evolution, but Dutton's father raises an interesting point. Humans have developed many different ways of surviving in the world. That is what has made us a highly successful species. But, many of our survival mechanisms are not as useful as they once were. While there are large predators that can cause us harm, sharks just happen to spring to mind, they are not a present danger to us here in the middle of Auckland.

So, if fear responses, such as the need to run away from large animals that might eat us, are not as useful as they once were, what about other defence mechanisms? Sigmund Freud is a divisive character in the field of psychology. He certainly has his fans as well as his critics. One helpful part of his legacy is that Freud was very interested in defence mechanisms and formed the view that sometimes our instincts that are trying to protect us, can actually cause us harm. In short, if we perceive there to be threats to us when actually there are none, we can cut ourselves off from many experiences and opportunities.

One example of this that is worth exploring is tribalism. We all belong to tribes of different shapes and sizes. Some tribes are very large, an entire nation or gender identity. Some are small, a family or a coffee group. Some tribes endure for thousands of years, such as a religion or an ethnic group. Most of us belong to many different tribes and yet all of them add to our sense of identity and belonging. Every tribe we are part of can be talked about in terms of its similarities or differences to other tribes.

Forming different groups is one way human life has been able to flourish. The forming of community, or tribes, has had many benefits, from improving human survival to the advancement of human thought and technology. But there is also a downside. Strict ideas about one's tribal identity can lead to devaluing difference, which in turn leads to conflict. Tribalism at its worst becomes the mechanism by which one group of human beings seek to dominate another group of human beings. It is easy to cite examples from history from world wars, to race riots, to church debates. Right now the genocide in Gaza certainly leaps to mind. And closer to home, the introduction of the treaty principles bill to our parliament is evidence of one group seeking to dominate another within our society. A clear attack on principles of partnership enshrined in the treaty of Waitangi.

In today's gospel reading we heard the account of a moment in Jesus's ministry when a woman asks for help only to have Jesus refuse because the woman is from a different tribe. Jesus places a firm boundary between himself and this woman. She is excluded on the basis of tribal identity. We often talk about how Jesus was fully human and fully divine. What I love about this gospel story is that we see a brief moment where the first response of Jesus is very human. His first response suggests that the love of God only reaches so far.

And yet the Syrophenician woman persists. Her metaphor of dogs gathering the crumbs beneath the table, while clearly placing herself in the position of a dog, is also a demand for inclusion. She pushes Jesus, to be better, to think more broadly, to step into a love that is not limited but rather is limitless, and to do that Jesus has to accept her for the person she is. It is only then that Jesus demonstrates what divine love actually looks like, by moving from exclusion to a place of embrace. The woman is accepted, she gets what she asked for, and more than that her tribal identity is not sacrificed. Rather Jesus steps beyond human limitations into a greater expression of love.

The theologian Miroslav Volf, speaks of this passage as a demonstration of love, that does not seek to dominate but rather willingly reaches beyond the barriers of tribe, status and class. And in this story that radical expression of love is initiated from the person with the least power in the situation. Volf describes this as a moment of embrace. He uses that word because when we embrace another person, an act of surrounding another person with love, we have to put our arms around the entirety of that person. Embrace requires complete acceptance of another regardless of any differences there may be. He further points out, that true embrace is also a mutual activity. The embrace is only complete when the person I place my arms around, reciprocates by extending the same loving welcome and acceptance of me. True embrace creates a space in which people come together and affirm and accept the identity of the other.

What this suggests is that the fullness of God's love is not found in places of comfort. The fullness of God's love does not look inwards towards other members of our tribe. Rather it pushes us out from the familiar towards those who are different. Loving those who are like us is not difficult, but loving those who we disagree with, who do not share our values, whose identity may even challenge our own, is extremely hard. And yet this is where God calls us. To love and accept others as they are, and to create a place for them. Amen.