

Inclusion

“Whoever is not against you is for you”

Reflection 20 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Many people in our time weigh the churches of their experience in the scales and find them to be judgmental, legalistic, hypocritical, anti-gay, anti-science, out of touch, politicized and sectarian, and have just zoned out. They do, however, still seek God. They still seek what is good and kind and loving. In fact, many, many people and especially Millennials, those in their 20s, seek to live out the love of God in practical, healing, inclusive ways. And this is good.

Now the church of my youth was not in any way inclusive. Only we few were saved. Only those who were exactly like us in faith and practice were saved. We preached a sectarian message, so sectarian that it could scarcely be called gospel. We breathed a sectarian air. We lived sectarian lives.

I still remember that spring day in high school, Great Lakes Christian College, a Church of Christ high school, when my friend and I were walking in downtown Beamsville, Ontario and we started thinking through the mathematics of salvation. If only we few in the Churches of Christ were saved – maybe two million in a world of six billion, that’s what? One in 3000 are saved? The rest are all backdrop? The rest are all collateral damage? And it didn’t make sense to us! Of course, it didn’t!

Since then, in an age of increasing pluralism, we have all come in contact with people who think very differently than we do. And we can’t just suppose that they’re all willfully ignorant. Well, we can, but only at loss to ourselves. And so we wisely, I think, try to understand how they came to think as they do. What assumptions drive them? For that matter, what causes us to see things as we do? What cultural baggage are we carrying? To what in-group are we trying to play? And if somehow we could just get inside the other person’s perspective, and see how our thinking looks to them, what would that look like? And so we have these people trying to live out the love of God in practical, healing, inclusive ways. They seek bridges that might connect people in all their glorious diversity but too often they find in churches only walls that divide.

So here’s the question: Could the historic church for centuries have misunderstood Jesus and what he was teaching? On closer look at long-forgotten texts, the answer proves to be Yes. One such long-forgotten text is Luke 9:46-50. An argument had broken out among Jesus’ inner core of disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. That often happened! So Jesus, knowing what they were thinking, took a little child and had him stand beside him, that is, in the place of importance where the disciples wanted to stand. And Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me. For he who is least among you all – he is the greatest.” Now verse 49 – “Master,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said, “for whoever is not against you is for you.”

What a great slogan! What a great principle to remember! Except that some of you remember maybe another saying of Jesus, in fact, just two chapters later in Luke, Luke 11:23, “He who is

not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.” So which is it? Of course what we have here is a reminder not to proof-text, a reminder that there are multiple perspectives in Scripture and that understanding them well depends on context. In Luke 11, Jesus is debating his critics, the Pharisees and those who followed them, and so finally he clarifies what’s going on, “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.” That’s that text. Now back in our text, Luke 9:46-50.

The disciples are arguing about who is greatest. Jesus had just taken Peter, James and John up on a mountain where they had witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration. So what’s up with that? What’s with Peter, James and John? “How come I didn’t get to go?” And the air hangs heavy with what? With ego! So Jesus has to remind them as he has to repeatedly, over and over again, “He who is least among you all – he is the greatest.” And then John maybe still full of his mountain top experience, says, “Master, we saw a man driving out demons.” Now that’s surprising enough. People other than those in Jesus’ inner circle were driving out demons! In fact, just a few verses earlier we read that Jesus’s inner circle failed at driving out a demon. Maybe that’s what gets John so worked up. Maybe that’s what leads him to, “We saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.”

So now do you see why Jesus answers as he does? When John should have been celebrating that the kingdom was spreading, that there was a man out there driving out demons in Jesus’ name, that Jesus’ influence was growing, that good was being done, that people were being helped, he’s trying to stop it because “that man is not one of us.” And Jesus is saying, “I don’t care. It doesn’t matter if he’s one of us or not. Good is being done. Who holds the franchise on helping people?”

And so we see what we now see everywhere in the Gospels – that Jesus was the most inclusive person who ever lived. He came not so much to start a new religion as to launch a revolution of practical, healing, inclusive love worldwide. He came not so much to demand a set of doctrines and rituals for the few as to teach a way of being for everyone. So when we are angry, Jesus tells us to drop our anger. When we are judging others, saying and thinking the most outrageous things about someone, Jesus tells us to stop. When we are overwhelming by fear and anxiety, Jesus tells us to let go and trust God always, in all circumstances. When we feel sinned against, Jesus tells us to forgive. Those dismissed by others as “sinners,” Jesus tells us to fraternize with. Those considered outcasts in society, Jesus tells us to take seriously and respect. Inclusion, and more inclusion. Include that group, and that group, and that group over there, and then still that other group. And then start seeing them as people. Those who are hungry and homeless, Jesus tells us to feed and house. When we find that some people really are against us – are, in fact, our enemies – Jesus tells us to love them. And when we run into people whose faith exceeds that of our own communities of faith, Jesus tells us to applaud and acclaim them. To all men and women everywhere whoever they are or whatever they have done, Jesus offers the opportunity to start over, to be reborn, be forgiven, and then to discover within themselves the Spirit of God. Jesus was, emphatically was – go back and read the Story again – the most inclusive person who ever lived. You have to remember that Jesus didn’t get crucified for being too exclusive, too sectarian. He got in trouble in large part for welcoming sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors and Roman centurions into the kingdom of God. And that trouble eventually got him crucified.

And so of all people on earth followers of Jesus are to be the most inclusive. Paul would one day write: “This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:9-10).

I think of the lyrics to the James Taylor song, “Shed a Little Light,”

Let us turn our thoughts today
 To Martin Luther King
 And recognize that there are ties between us
 All men and women
 Living on the earth
 Ties of hope and love
 Sister and brotherhood
 That we are bound together
 In our desire to see the world become
 A place in which our children
 Can grow free and strong

Shed a little light, Oh Lord
 So that we can see

This is the way God our Creator wired us.

Notice that other passage we looked at this morning, Luke 11:23, these words of Jesus: “He who is not with me is against me, and – now the parallelism – he who does not gather with me (because that’s what I do, I gather), scatters (because that’s what ego and lust and greed do).”

Or I think of the words of the Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, “All people are people,” not just the rich but the poor, not just the governing class up on the hills above Port-au-Prince but the luckless inhabitants of Cité du Soleil, or in our case (and note: I am not talking policy, I am talking respect, even reverence), not just Christians but Muslims and everyone else, not just white but black, Hispanic and Asian, not just straight but lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, not just those came undocumented on the Mayflower, or those who later came undocumented through Ellis Island, but those who have come more recently undocumented. And people seeking God and trying to find God in churches need to hear this in those churches.

– Dale Pauls