

Inclusion and the Kingdom of God

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Last week I thought I'd invite us to think about what faithfulness required by asking, "What would Anna do?" Mostly, I was illustrating the difficulty that is associated with trying to know what someone would do. I'm sure that many of you were wondering what knowing what Anna would do has to do with our living faithful Christian lives; and the answer is nothing, absolutely nothing. What should be more troubling, however, is the degree to which we are willing to leave Jesus behind when considering what Christian faithfulness invites and requires. I know that it sounds counter-intuitive. I mean, who would leave Jesus behind when considering matters of what it means to follow him? But, in addition to learning how difficult it is to get back into the first century in order to know what Jesus would do, once we scratch beneath the surface and begin to discover what a different world it was back then, we grow more comfortable leaving the first century behind, and the historical Jesus with it.

In this regard, think about the clues that I offered last Sunday. The cross means non-conformity, and kids mean inclusion. Non-conformity and inclusion: these were (and are) two defining marks of the church. In more formal theological language, we speak at worship of the church as being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, where being "one" means unity that includes all sorts of diversity, and "holy" means set apart by God to be a light to the nations. One of the attributes of the early Christian community that made it so miraculously ground-breaking way back when was the bridges Jesus built to allow a way for outsiders, those who were traditionally excluded, to be included with the embrace of God's love and the reign of the God's kingdom. Those instances where Jesus sat down for dinner with tax collectors and sinners for that was the rule, not the exception. It was a gesture that symbolized the Good News that Jesus wasn't going to allow conventional boundaries to separate him from sinners who needed to know and to experience God's love. This drove the Pharisees and Sadducees mad, literally. It drove them to anger through hostility to plots to undermine him.

Jesus led with God's grace, and offered God's forgiveness to those who needed it, not just to those who thought themselves worthy of it. It really is true that Jesus' teachings on forgiveness, reconciliation, fellowship and community were at the heart of his vision for God's people, and they were at the heart, as well, of his conflicts with the people who actually were God's people at the time. He regularly, and intentionally, disregarded the hedge made up of man-made, religion inspired rules and regulations that had been built up around the law given by God on tablets of stones as Moses walked down from the mountain. Washing hands, plucking grain, even healing on the Sabbath: these weren't in the core code of divine law. They were additional requirements regarded as consistent with, helpful for, and respectful of what it meant to live in accordance with God's law. If

our goal were to steer clear of actual violations of God's law, then we would appreciate the "hedge" as a preventive measure, or a proactive approach, to keep us from getting too close to harming ourselves and our relationship with God. Jesus regularly, and by design, ignored honoring the hedge if these supposedly beneficial measures caused God's people to miss seeing the forest through the trees.

Love the Lord with all you've got, and your neighbor as yourself. Love by serving. These were God's key commands. Sustaining the practice of honoring artificial divisions while the case for reaching out with God's love needed to be raised and praised was a big part, a central tenet, a core principle of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed and lived. Through fellowship with tax collectors and sinners, by breaking bread with men like Zacchaeus, in welcoming that woman who was a sinner from the city to bathe his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair, to dine with his own disciples who ate with hands unwashed and defiled: these were Jesus' way of keeping God's priorities straight. Eliminating false barriers, including the excluded, embracing those who needed to know God loved them: these are the themes that our Gospel text is about. That's what Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom was about. That's what Jesus was trying to do in his effort to refocus and define the meaning, the ministry, and the mission of God's people.

There is a great connection in this regard between the First Lesson and the Gospel. The theme of inclusion is all over the Gospels. Jesus was continually active diminishing the significance and eliminating the difference between social distinctions and historic divisions. He addressed the rich and the poor, the educated and uneducated, the rural folks of Galilee and city slickers in Jerusalem, the healthy and the sick, the just and sinners alike. Time and again, he drew close to stand with the poor, the hungry, tax collectors, sinners, Samaritans, women, and children. Again, these texts about children in the Gospel Mark are not intended to serve as sentimental, tug-at-your hearts, love-the-children moments in the life of Jesus. They are consistent applications and extensions of God's grace, which was about the work of including those who were relegated to the periphery, turning second-class non-citizens into those whom Jesus embraced as friends, as "A-list" recipients given special invitations to know that God had drawn close, that they had been caught up in the train of His glory, touched by His love, singed, so to speak, by the back-draft of the Spirit's fire, which is exactly what Joel had in mind when he offered his well-known prophesy, "And it shall come to pass in those days that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh" (Joel 2:28) – all flesh, without distinction. In Acts 2, Luke regards the presence of the Spirit in the life of the early church as the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, as the meaning of what Jesus meant when he said that the reign of God had come upon us.

In our Old Testament Lesson, the Spirit of God was shared with seventy, and then with two, who became prophets among God's people. Moses voiced the hope that "all the Lord's people should become prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit on all," none excluded, not women, nor children, nor sinners among them. Again, that is what Joel is

talking about when he describes that sons and daughters shall prophesy, that young an old will see visions, and that even on servants and handmaids God will pour out a portion of His Spirit, that all shall prophesy; and according to Acts 2, Luke is saying that this is precisely what happened in the life of the church. Again, inclusion is the point, moving beyond conventional divisions and traditional barriers. The inclusion of children is not just a nice touch, a precious moment, a sentimental distraction. It is an eye-opener, an in-your-face eye-opener to the kind of inclusion God's kingdom calls for, the kind of inclusion God's grace makes possible, the kind of inclusion that defines life as we know it in the body of Christ. This is how Paul puts it in Galatians. "Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with him. We are no longer defined by our differences. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female. All are one in Christ." That's the vision Jesus preached, the reality that found expression in the life of those who responded to Jesus' message and gathered in his name.

Like many of you, I have often been troubled by the message that comes through our Gospel text. I am certainly uncomfortable with its focus on self-mutilation and maiming. My own view is that if, as the Christ, Jesus heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, restores hearing to the deaf, and raised the dead to walk, never mind paralytics lowered through ceilings, then who am I to pluck out my eye, or cut off my hand so that I can enter heaven lame, or maimed, or mauled by self-mutilation? Why increase the healer's work-load when prayer and discipline might be the better approach? But this may be the key to how we're misreading this text, because in the end, and in the main, Jesus was not primarily focused on our personal holiness as individuals living on our own. Jesus had his sights set on the community God has called us to be, on the reign of the kingdom of God, on what it meant to be God's holy people, not simply a collection of holy individuals. That's not to say that personal holiness is not important and necessary. Of course it is.

But let's not be focused on the eye we're having trouble with that we fail to see those around us who need to know and feel God's love for them. Let's not be so focused on the foot that's stumbling that we fail to stand with the lost, the lonely, those who need our voice, and our helping hand. I am not just talking about advocacy. I am talking about inclusion and the witness that can be offered by a community that's holy because it is set apart as God's people, called to be a light to the world, to display in our life together what God's grace makes possible. It is the community of God's people that Moses had in mind when he spoke of God's Spirit in Numbers. It is the community of God's people that Joel had in mind in the prophetic vision that Luke cites in the Acts 2. It is the community of God's people that Jesus had in mind when he drew our attention to children, and asked us to welcome them, and to include them, along with women, and outsiders of every sort. For these were precisely the kind of people that Jesus wanted to include among those who have been called by God, among those who even today gather for worship, and offer their lives in service to the kingdom by learning to walk humbly and to live simply and faithfully ... in Jesus' name. Amen