A People of Inclusion

Easter Sunday

April 19, 2017

[Acts 10:34-43](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Easter/AEasterPrin_RCL.html#ot1) [Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Easter/AEasterPrin_RCL.html#ps1)

[Colossians 3:1-4](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Easter/AEasterPrin_RCL.html#nt1) [John 20:1-18](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Easter/AEasterPrin_RCL.html#gsp1)

This Easter Sunday I would like us to consider two texts.

In our reading from Acts today, Peter declares, “It’s God’s own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from—if you want God and are ready to do as God says, the door is open” (10:34-35; *The Message*).

Sounds easy, huh?

But those of you who know the Gospel stories about Peter know that nothing ever comes easy for him. He can be narrow-minded, even bigoted; scared and cowardly; obtuse; sycophantic; and just plain dumb.

In other words, he’s just like us.

Only one day before Peter speaks about God’s equal love for everyone, he had a vision. In this vision God smacks him upside the head. As Acts relates it:

It was about noon. Peter got hungry and started thinking about lunch. While lunch was being prepared. . . . he saw the skies open up. Something that looked like a huge blanket lowered by ropes at its four corners settled on the ground. Every kind of animal and reptile and bird you could think of was on it. Then a voice came: “Go to it, Peter—kill and eat.”

Peter said, “Oh, no, Lord. I’ve never so much as tasted food that wasn’t kosher.”

The voice came a second time: “If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.”

This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the skies (Acts 10:9-16; *The Message*).

Notice that it takes Peter three tries to get it.

That same day some people come to his house; they want Peter to go see Cornelius, a Roman officer.

Cornelius is not a Jew. (And we need to remember that many if not most of the first followers of Jesus were Jews.) He’s a “God-fearer.” This term was used for non-Jews who were attracted to Judaism and adopted some of its practices.

When Peter arrives the next day at Cornelius’, what’s the first thing out of his mouth? Basically, it’s “Me? You called me? To be with this guy who’s not even Jewish?!” “You know,” Peter says, “This is really messed up. Jews just don’t do this—visit and relax with people of another race.”

But then he goes, “Oh yeah, God showed me just the other day that no race is better than any other.”

And then, just like us, he tries to cover his rear end: “So the minute I was sent for, I came, no questions asked” (Acts 10:27-29; *The Message*, revised).

Yeah, right.

Those of you who know me know that on my way to sainthood I’m never sarcastic. So why my sarcasm here?

Because Paul absolutely corroborates Peter’s back-and-forth, I’ve-got-to-please-everybody character.

In his letter to the Christians in Galatia, Paul gives us our second passage for today: he forthrightly and unequivocally declares, “In Christ’s family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us, you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ” (3:27-28; *The Message*).

But here, as in Acts, there’s a backstory.

Just a little earlier in his letter Paul informs us that the two parts of the early Jesus movement have come to an agreement: James, Peter, and John will continue their ministry among Jesus’ Jewish sisters and brothers; Paul and Barnabas will take the Good News to non-Jews.

But immediately after this listen to Paul: he’s absolutely furious:

Later, when Peter came to Antioch, I had a face-to-face confrontation with him because he was clearly out of line. Here’s the situation. Earlier, before certain persons had come from James, Peter regularly ate with the non-Jews. But when that conservative group came from Jerusalem, he cautiously pulled back and put as much distance as he could manage between himself and his non-Jewish friends. That’s how fearful he was of the conservative clique. . . . Unfortunately, the rest of the Jewish followers of Jesus in the church in Antioch joined in that hypocrisy so that even Barnabas was swept along in the charade (Galatians 2:11-13; *The Message*, revised).

I think there’s only one other time where Paul is really, really mad.

And once again it’s about exclusion and inclusion.

Three days ago, on Maundy Thursday, we heard the wonderful passage about Communion/the Eucharist in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Corinth:

I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26; NRSV).

Here once more there’s a back story. Paul is emphasizing the sacredness of the Eucharist precisely because some Christians in Corinth are *desecrating* it.

How are they doing this?

We need to remember that Communion in the early Church was part of a meal, not separated as it is today. This communion-meal later came to be called the *agápē*, or love-feast.

So, listen to what Paul says about what’s going on in Corinth, listen to his anger:

And then I find that you bring your divisions to worship—you come together, and instead of eating the Lord’s Supper, you bring in a lot of food from the outside and make pigs of yourselves. Some are left out, and go home hungry. Others have to be carried out, too drunk to walk. I can’t believe it! Don’t you have your own homes to eat and drink in? Why would you stoop to desecrating God’s church? Why would you actually shame God’s poor? I never would have believed you would stoop to this. And I’m not going to stand by and say nothing (1 Corinthians 11:20-22; *The Message*).

So, what’s the common theme in Acts and in Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Corinthians? It’s exclusion versus inclusion.

Here for me is the saddest part of the New Testament: the inclusive love of Jesus, of Peter in Acts, and of Paul, is already, just fifty years later, being ripped to shreds. By the beginning of the second century, the Church has become exclusive: Jews are excluded;[[1]](#footnote-1) instead of being children of God, slaves are told it’s God’s will that they obey their masters;[[2]](#footnote-2) instead of being equals or nearly-equals in church, women are now told to keep their mouths shut.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It happened in the first century. And it’s happening now:

* Conservative Roman Catholics are attacking Pope Francis for his compassionate views towards divorced Catholics and our LGBT sisters and brothers.
* New orders are targeting immigrants to our country who have lived and worked here for twenty or thirty years and have children born here.
* Congress wants to disembowel the Affordable Care Act, leaving millions of people without health insurance.
* The new Secretary of Education wants to gut public schools in order to help wealthy private schools; her actions will especially hurt poor and special needs children.
* States are considering and even passing anti-LGBT laws.

These exclusionary actions are not just misguided. They’re immoral.

My paternal grandfather was an exclusionist. My paternal grandfather was an out-and-out racist. He hated what he called “mezkins” and “nigras.”

As a former Texas Ranger, my grandfather would brag about killing mezkins and nigras.

Grandfather, you and Jesus have profoundly shaped my life.

Because of you two, inclusiveness is my default position. I believe with all my heart that inclusiveness is the hard-won—hard-won—position of the Bible and the Gospel.

Many of our parishioners, sad to say, have been targets of exclusion”

* As a person with Downs Syndrome, Poppy was not wanted at another church in town;
* because of the color of his skin, Jerry was told he was not welcome in a church;
* because he was gay, our late friend Darren was abused physically and spiritually by his church;
* some of our female parishioners could no longer stay in their sexist churches.

But, sisters and brothers, we are a resurrection people. We are a people of faith and hope. We are a people of justice.

We are a people of inclusion.

Where all are welcome.

No asterisks. No exceptions. No kidding.

Amen.

1. See the Gospel of John; on the theme of exclusion and inclusion in John and the *Gospel of Thomas*, I recommend Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1 Timothy 6:1: “Whoever is a slave must make the best of it, giving respect to his master so that outsiders don’t blame God and our teaching for his behavior.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36. The passage, as the NRSV suggests, is a later interpolation. On the corruption of Paul’s message, see Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church’s Conservative Icon*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)