

Inclusive

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Third Presbyterian Church
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John 3:14-21

The case for inclusion is a simple one; the implementation of that case is not.

We just heard from John 3, one of the most iconic passages in the Bible. Even if you don't know it you probably do; it appeared on hand-made signs at nearly every Super Bowl I watched growing up, held by a man wearing a rainbow wig.

"God so loved the world." That is the case to be made, whose implementation is complex. It is a passage often used to invite or encourage people into some kind of conversion, or more than that. Our response to the invitation *does* matter, but not in the way it's often understood in parts of American Christianity. God so loved the world. Our simple case for inclusion with such a complex implementation.

If you are a guest with us today, we welcome you, and whether a guest or long-time member or recent visitor, we invite you to continue on a journey with us – a journey that is about Lent, about faith, and, about six words that we are embracing to help us interpret who we are, both to ourselves and to those in our wider community who might be led to connect with us. Spiritual, thoughtful, compassionate, artistic, engaged, and – today – inclusive.

Like any journey, we are, I believe, on our way to inclusion, with the destination always at the horizon, and the path ever unfolding before us. There are markers in this congregation's history for which I am grateful, but which also serve as prompts to aspire to deeper and broader forms of welcome.

A century ago, my predecessor Paul Moore Strayer preached in this place on a Sunday morning and preached in the union halls on a Sunday evening. That need has changed, but the notion of this place ever expanding to include people who aren't here now, people of different races and ethnicities and classes – that vision is ever before us. We are who we are, and needn't be defensive about that. But we needn't be complacent about it either. Whatever we do must have integrity to who we are, but integrity needn't be inertia as we think about welcoming persons of color more fully, or persons who visit us on a Monday or Thursday or Saturday in one of our hunger ministries, but who would also bring gifts to us on a Wednesday night or a Sunday morning. What would that inclusion look like?

Some fifty years ago plus, our Session, led by elder Lilian Alexander, drafted the overture – "Presbyterian" for legislation – that led to the ordination of women to Presbyterian ministry. Now, a generation plus later, having secured the rights of gay and lesbian persons to be fully considered for ordination in the Presbyterian Church, we now will likely adopt denominational provisions in the next few weeks allowing for full marriage equality in the Presbyterian Church. (*Note: That provision has now passed.*)

I am grateful for what can only be called progress, and I am grateful that this congregation has provided leadership. But even this is a process. While our younger generations say that this is no big deal, both ordination and marriage will remain big deals for us, and part of our job will continue to be to support

other Presbyterians across the spectrum in their responses and reactions. And we remember, when we say LGBT, the “T,” our transgendered members and friends, and how we can support them in their journey toward fuller acceptance and justice.

Inclusion, whether along racial or socio-economic lines, along lines of human sexuality, even along lines of theological difference, can never be “been there, done that.” It is always “what’s next.”

Clarence Jordan remembers from his boyhood a man in his Baptist church in Georgia who sang in the choir on Sunday and was a jailer who beat black inmates on Monday and never once saw any incongruity. That means that as easy as it is to look “out there” to be critical of people and institutions that would exclude, we must look inward as well, inward at the church and inward in our own souls.

The case is simple, but the implementation is complex, and in part it is so complex because the premise, God’s radical and unconditional welcome, challenges our own human impulses to divide, to categorize, to pick teams and choose sides which invariably leave people out. It relates in large part on how we perceive others; it also relates in large part on how we perceive ourselves.

I am participating this year in something called Person2Person, whereby members of the community are paired with other members of the community, with racial and ethnic diversity as the goal. My partner’s name is Nancy – she was born to a Korean mother and an African-American father. I was not. We meet regularly, and rather than discuss big issues, we simply talk, visit, about our jobs, our families. It is about a relationship, not an agenda. Last week, we met for breakfast where I was the only white person in the place. Nancy knew the owner, who said hello. I felt perfectly welcomed and the oatmeal was as perfect as oatmeal can get. It was a perfectly normal occasion. And yet it was not, of course. We were having breakfast together in the first place because racial relationships in our community and in our culture, and even in the church, are frayed. Inclusion means that our long history is an unacceptable history – predating but including Selma, to Ferguson, to the University of Oklahoma, and so much more. The call to inclusion means that we confess and confront our history and move ahead on a different path. Simply, but never easily.

A year or two ago, I found myself on an elevator at RIT. I discovered why it was so quiet; I was the only “hearing” person in that small space. And for those few moments, my perspective was transformed. Society, and perhaps the church, would perceive me as the one with assets, with the advantage, with privilege. Yet I could not communicate, I could not understand or be understood. It was my deficit, or truthfully, my perceived deficit, because of how I had been conditioned. I was the visitor, even the stranger. What would that inclusion look like?

We have some choices. But really, our best choice is based on a choice God made. God chose to include us. That’s the case. God so loved the world. It is the premise of the gospel of John; it is the premise of the gospel, I would say. Whatever you call it – God’s agenda, God’s project, God’s promise and intention – God loves us. Without condition.

American Christianity is often portrayed as an exclusive proposition. It is not. True Christianity is *not* an exclusive proposition. God so loved the world, we are told. We are also told that God did not enter the world, in the form of Jesus, to condemn, but to redeem, to restore, to reconcile.

And if God so loved the world, God loves us. The “us” is not some, or a portion, but all. And if that’s true – and I believe it is – then by simple extension our project becomes God’s project, or, more rightly, the other way around. God’s project of inclusion becomes our project of inclusion. Without exception and without condition. Whatever artificial, arbitrary, human-constructed barriers we set up are just that –

constructed by us. They therefore need to be torn down by us, so that in society, and in the church, all are welcomed as clearly as we have been welcomed. That is true regardless of the color of our skin, or the contents of our bank account, or the objects of our affection.

Because John 3 is so iconic, it can easily become a cliché, said so quickly and casually that we gloss over its powerful and fundamental truth. We should not. Fred Craddock and Eugene Boring (*The People's New Testament Commentary*, page 298) write that "the point here is not how much (God loved) but how – God gave his Son... (for) his enemies...(for) those who have rebelled against him." God loves and God gives. Craddock and Boring remind us that "this should not be pictured as though God sacrificed or punished someone else...God does not punish someone else, but takes human sin unto himself."

That is love which does not condemn the world, but saves it. That is love which does not love just a little, or only some, but loves fully and completely and all, every beloved child of God, created in the image of God.

When we feel unlovable and unloved, we are invited to remember that, that we are included in that love. And when we claim that for ourselves, we claim it, immediately, in the same breath and thought, for every other beloved child of God, very similar to us, very different from us.

Having been included by God's love, we have some choices. We can choose not to include. That would be sin, intentional and overt or unintentional and hidden. But it would be sin, and we must resist it with every ounce of God-given energy we have – wherever we find ourselves.

You can read the paper or read the news on your phone or simply look around and know we are not doing very well in this inclusion business. But it is our mandate and it is our calling, and, really, it is our privilege and our gift.

We are making progress, that is true, or, rather, God is making progress using the flawed tools God uses. But there are times when progress regresses, as perhaps it is on race right now. So we are vigilant. And there are other times when progress simply reveals the next leg in the journey, as perhaps it does on human sexuality right now. So we are hopeful. It is how God made us, different and diverse, and it is how God wants us to be, loving God by loving one another.

Denise O'Neil Green writes that "Diversity is reality. Inclusion is a choice." ("Diversity Is a Reality, Inclusion Is A Choice": A Book Review, July 15, 2014) God made that choice, a choice predicated on love that is wondrous and deep and broad and high, so amazing that it took human form, so all-excelling that it died for us.

What God's choice in mind, our choice is clear. To love with that love, even when our love is flawed and incomplete. To include with that inclusive love, even when we do so awkwardly and slowly. We have, really, no other choice, for to deny the image of God in others is to deny the image of God in ourselves, and in *this* God's creation there is no room for second class citizens, no room for lesser children. There is only room for love, and the inclusivity of that love's invitation. That is what eternal life looks like.

"My song is love unknown, my Savior's love to me, Love to the loveless shown That they might lovely be." That they, and we, might lovely be. Amen.