



“The Challenges of Being the Church: 4. Being An Inclusive Church”

Text: Matthew 5:13-16

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We're spending some time this summer talking about the challenges facing the Church - with a capital "C" - and, in particular, the challenges facing this church. It should not come as news to anyone that across our nation, and in other parts of the world, being the church is hard work. With the increasing secularization of the world, the church no longer is perceived as the important and central institution it once was. While we, inside the church, still believe that the good news of God's love makes a critical difference in the lives of all people, because of bad behavior, bad practice, and - frankly - bad theology, the church no longer enjoys the place of respect and importance it once held. So, we're facing significant challenges.

We have already looked at the challenge - and the extraordinary potential - of being a downtown church in a revitalizing downtown. We talked about compassion as central to who we are and what we do. Compassion is the basis for all ethical belief and action. Last week, we talked about justice and how, throughout our history, God's people have been called to be people of justice who practice and ensure justice for all.

Today, we're going to spend some time talking about being an inclusive church. That is to say, we're going to think about how the church is to be a diverse community of believers whose central purpose is to witness to God's limitless love, made known in Jesus Christ, in the fullness of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. In a world that glories in dividing people and pitting them against one another, God calls the church to be welcoming to all and inclusive of all.

Let's go back to the time when the people of Israel were freed from slavery in Egypt. In anticipation of their hasty departure from Egypt, the people ate a quick meal, which included unleavened bread. As time went on, this meal became a memorial meal of this critical moment in their history. The Passover, as we know it today, took centuries to find its current form. But the meal and its meaning are ancient.

Early in the development of the Passover, the custom became to include the stranger and the alien who lived in their midst. They were welcomed and went through the same rituals of initiation that all Jews go through. But they were to be included if they sought inclusion.

In the passage from Deuteronomy that we read again this morning, we heard again that during the festival celebration of the harvest, the alien was to be included in the feasting and the thanksgiving. There is no question that anyone outside the community could have been excluded. But they were specifically to be included. The power of distinction to divide groups of people, which sets their feet on a path that can lead to conflict, was always before them. By sitting down together, feasting together, spending time together, the power of inclusion overtook the power of division and demarcation.

When you get to the time of Jesus and the New Testament, the same principle is at work. Begin by simply considering the people Jesus called to his inner circle of disciples: fishermen, political operatives, tax collectors, and other normal forms of diverse occupation that we know nothing of their work. They weren't all cut from the same cloth. There was little that they held in common, except that they heard Jesus' call to discipleship and answered it, and they lived in a land occupied by the Roman Empire. Yet, they became a cohesive unit and, when the time came, they took the good news into the world.

One of the first significant conflicts in the early church was over who could be a Christian and how that needed to happen. Some argued that the gospel was only for those who had been Jews. Others said that the gospel was also intended for the Gentiles - the non-Jews. Some said that if Gentiles were going to be Christian they had to submit to the Jewish practice of circumcision and follow the dietary restrictions. Others thought that was asking too much. They ultimately resolved the issue by realizing that it wasn't what we do that makes us Christian but what God has done on our behalf. And so, Gentiles were baptized and welcomed into the church in one of the church's first conflicts over inclusion.

In writing to the Church in Rome, the Apostle Paul said:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

As cantankerous as Paul could be, he argues for including whoever answers God's call in Jesus Christ and he encourages the early church members to glorify God with a united voice as they welcome one another into the community of God's people.

By the time of the writing of the Letter to the Galatians, this observation is offered:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free,
nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
(Gal. 3:28)

The dividing labels and distinctions used by the world are no longer in effect within the church. The binary world of Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, no longer applies, because Christ has broken down those humanly erected walls of division. Jesus came to break down such walls so that inclusion leading to unity could become real and Jesus calls his disciples to that work as well.

And there is the church's challenge.

That we live in a deeply divided world is not news. That we sometimes enjoy a deeply divided world is disturbing. That we allow ourselves to be divided and separated from each other is a spiritual sickness.

Our world – our cultural – thrives on division. It seems to believe that there is no real alternative. We teach it to our children and you need only look at most schools to see how successful we have been.

The church has not come to grips with the wide – and sometimes wild – diversity that exists in our world. The church has been fearful and easily intimidated whenever the subject of inclusivity is raised.

For over thirty years, the church has wrestled with what it would mean to be truly inclusive of its LGBTQ children. Some of the most appalling behavior you can imagine was perpetrated on some in the church by others in the church. Some of the most horrific statements were made by some in the church against others in the church. But, bearing the wounds and bruises of a long struggle, we finally came to the answer that no one should be excluded from the fellowship of God's people. And some still cannot accept that answer and picket.

But, what are we going to do about God's people who are immigrants and aliens in our midst? We have a growing Hispanic population in Evansville and the surrounding area. The Roman Catholic congregations are moving forward with new ministries for Spanish speaking peoples. How will we relate to these new neighbors in our town?

How are we going to include the poor in the life of our congregation? The impression is that you have to be rich to be a Presbyterian. The impression is that you have to be well educated to be a Presbyterian. How do we reach out to people, knowing that is how we are perceived? Do we simply farm out our mission to others and write them checks to do the work on our behalf, or do we meet the poor and less educated eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart and include them in our community of faith?

And who else have we overlooked? Who are the invisible longing for inclusion? Who are those crying out for belonging that we have failed to hear? Who are those who have given up, put away their hope, and who truly believe that no one wants them? Who are the hurting, the overlooked, the ignored who need to claim their rightful, God-given place in the community of God's people?

I really like the new branding effort going on in Evansville. "E is for everyone," has great potential. But its greatest potential may be found in challenging us to make it true. In all honesty, "E is not yet for everyone." But it offers a vision of who we can be in Evansville. It is a challenge for each of us to reach out to another and make them part of the great whole. It is a dream that ancient divisions can be overcome and a welcome can be offered to each and everyone.

And the church - and especially this church - is for everyone. That's because God is for everyone and God's people are for everyone. In order to be that church, we will need to face our fears, our prejudices, our narrow-mindedness, our preconceptions, and our biases.

In, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, reminds us, "I say to you all, once again - in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open."

Division, discord, enmity - these we have in abundance. With authentic welcome, true community, deep bonds of friendship in the Spirit of God, and trust in our God's promise to be with us and never leave us or forsake us,

"Let us build a house where all are named,
their songs and visions heard,
And loved and treasured, taught and claimed
as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
prayers of faith and songs of grace,
Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter,
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place."

For now and evermore. Amen.



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