

We've Heard That Message Before

Can inclusiveness become an idol?

Mark 6:1-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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July 8, 2018

Question. Have you ever heard me use the word "inclusive" in one of my sermons? Have you heard me preach about the inclusive love of God, or the need to be an inclusive community of faith?

Chances are, even if you've visited just one before, you could probably respond (a bit tiredly), "Yes, we've heard that message before." Yes, I'll admit it. I would probably be found guilty as charged of being a "one note preacher," – that one note being inclusiveness.

In fact, I was once approached right after a service of worship by a man who bluntly accused me, "**Rev. Freeman, you have made an idol out of inclusiveness.**" (Idolatry, by the way, is among the gravest accusations you can make against a Presbyterian.) Don't worry, it wasn't here at College Hill. I'll share that story in a moment.

Yet, it's true. Like how some preachers can turn almost any biblical passage into a message of being saved from eternal damnation, I can turn almost any biblical text, perhaps even the same one, to reveal a message about inclusiveness. Case in point. In today's Gospel reading from Mark 6, Jesus is rejected by **his non-inclusive hometown folks** who, even though astounded by Jesus' words and deeds, question his authority simply because of their familiarity with him and his family. **Yes, sometimes it's hard to go home again.**

And, when Jesus sends out his disciples two by two to minister to others in nearby towns, he instructs them that **if they are not extended hospitality, or accepted, then they should shake off the dust that is on their feet as a testimony against them when they leave that place.** This is something many of us have done, at least figuratively, in leaving places that were non-inclusive, perhaps even a church that was a proponent of oppressive theology.

So, yes, this biblical story can also be a lesson concerning **the need for acceptance, hospitality, and inclusion** – and the consequences if not extended. But why does this particular theme deserve more attention than a thousand other biblical themes that are preached from a traditional standpoint? This is why. **A message of inclusiveness reveals the need for both the desire and the action necessary to include, to accept, to offer hospitality, to be in authentic relationship with, and to love others and ourselves. We call this inclusiveness being Christ-like. A message of inclusiveness also reveals a particular understanding of the nature and character of God, a God that loves unconditionally, and calls us to love God in return, not to fear God. Reverence, yes. Be afraid of, no.**

Here's the story about making inclusiveness and idol. Back in December of 1999, I was the pastor of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Dallas, an inclusive congregation like College Hill, associated with the LGBTQ-friendly More Light Presbyterian movement.

One Sunday a representative of Grace Presbytery's Committee on Ministry (COM) visited to experience our worship service. His primary reason for visiting, however, was to observe me and to give a report that would go into my file. This was regularly done for ministers in that presbytery.

Wouldn't you know my sermon on that particular Sunday was entitled "**Overcoming Oppressive Theology.**" In that sermon, I was quite blunt in my admittedly opinionated statements concerning those who engrave their theology into granite and then demand that others think and act and believe exactly like them in order to be accepted and included in their faith community. I recounted the damage that was being done by those who believe in a controlling, binding, oppressive theology. Most likely, that is simply a reflection of their understanding of a God who is controlling, binding, and oppressive.

I told a story of the work of two pastors serving at the City of Refuge Community Church, UCC, in San Francisco, a congregation that ministers to those who are on the margins of church and society. Their Senior Pastor, Yvette Flunder, and Associate Pastor, Valerie Brown-Troutt, have written very eloquently on this subject. "The church of Jesus Christ," they wrote, "is in the midst of change, some of it for the better, and some of it for the worse. **Some of our theology binds, while some sets free.**"

I, and most if not all of you here this morning, are among those who have made the conscious decision and effort to leave oppressive theology behind. We are among those who have become disheartened that the way some people interpret the good news of Jesus Christ becomes bad news to many others, especially to those on the fringes of "respectable society." As I shared in that sermon 19 years ago, Flunder and Brown-Troutt go on to explain:

Overcoming oppressive theology, or a theology that excludes certain people, is critical in creating a Christian community for people on the periphery. Marginalized people respond to a community of openness and inclusiveness where other people from the edge gather. [As an aside, many of us describe this as the Isle of Misfit Toys.]

Such an atmosphere welcomes people and makes them feel safer to be who they are. A liberating theology of acceptance must be embodied by a liberating Christian community.

Many of you who are members of this congregation fit that description of feeling like you're on the periphery, and have felt unwelcomed in a previous community of faith because your theology had progressed beyond traditional orthodox Christianity. Pastors Flunder and Brown-Troutt go on to mention:

A person, church, or society can do extreme harm in the name of God and virtue and with the 'support' of scripture. Oppressive theology is a ball and chain on the heart of the body of Christ. With it we can keep each other in bondage.

It is crucial in the formation of community that those who were and are oppressed seek to overcome the theological millstones tied around their necks.

By God's grace, I've been able to untie a few from around my own neck. It is my sincere hope and prayer that in this community of faith you have been able to untie some of those theological millstones from around your own neck, as well.

In that sermon from long ago, I went on to declare what many believe is at the root of **oppressive theology** in this country. I think this is what got me labeled as an inclusiveness idolater. First, **a theology that confuses Christianity with nationalism**, that God really loves us and our country the most, that we need to make America great by getting back to God – the way they understand God, that is. Perhaps I shouldn't have added another quote from Flunder and Brown-Troutt: "Yet our God is not a God of any one nation, nor of any one denomination... Human beings, not buildings or governments or organizations, are called to be a habitation for the Spirit of God. "And therefore, we must preach a gospel that heals and brings wholeness to the person. Is the gospel intended to imprison people to a nation or to a denomination? Isaiah preached liberty to the captives and freedom to those in bondage. This is the gospel." This is what Jesus preached, as well.

I also stated that **oppressive theology was caused, in part, by approaching the interpretation of scripture with our own pre-conceived notions of what we want it to say. This is the method used, throughout the history of the Church and the history of our own nation, to justify valuing some people while devaluing others based on criteria such as their skin color and ethnic origin.** In that regard, now that racial and ethnic intolerance has been given voice again in the public sphere, we're hardly doing much better than when this country was first founded, at least not within most people's hearts.

Finally, I closed that sermon with a paragraph from Kathleen Ritter and Craig O'Neill's book, *Righteous Religion: Unmasking the Illusions of Fundamentalism and Authoritarian Catholicism*. Hey, if you're going all in, why not!

Once trapped spiritual energy is released, believers feel more open to allowing their faith to unfold. The intensity of the search for the perfect faith is diminished as what previously seemed fundamental is altered.

Rather than seeking just the right answers, they realize that many possible ways to express their faith exist... With this increased flexibility and openness, individuals somehow realize that [old teachings and authoritarian demands] had to be surrendered in order to move into deeper spiritual connections. They now understand that even the pain of disillusionment was necessary to reformulate the images of faith.

I concluded that sermon by asking, "**What oppressive theology do you need to overcome?**" I ask it again, today, of you.

So, you be the judge. Is it possible to make an idol out of inclusiveness? Here's the twist I've learned since then. Yes, inclusiveness can become an idol if it becomes one-sided and we don't figure out a way to include those who make that claim against us. To be a truly inclusive community of faith we must be hospitable, authentic, diverse, and open to all. That is our ongoing challenge.

Amen.