

Can inclusiveness become an idol?

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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- **“Rev. Freeman, you have made an idol out of inclusiveness.”**

As you might expect, there's a story behind that accusatory statement that was told to my face many years ago. I was once approached right after a service of worship by a visitor who bluntly accused me of idolatry, among the gravest accusations you can make against a Presbyterian. Don't worry, it wasn't here at College Hill.

Way back in December of 1999, I was the pastor of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Dallas, an inclusive congregation, who like College Hill, was associated with the More Light Presbyterian network of LGBTQ+ affirming congregations. That inclusion was considered quite radical 25 years ago, as College Hill knows.

Here's the story. 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 official 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.”** And the person visiting was clearly not progressive.

In that sermon, I was quite blunt in my accusatory statements concerning those who engrave their theology, their dogma, into granite, and then demand that others think and act and believe similarly to them in order to be acceptable and fully included in their community of faith, or even as Christians. **I recounted the damage that was being done by those who believe in a controlling, binding, oppressive theology.** In other words, the very opposite of Jesus' words that you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.

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 of oppressive theology. They write:

The church of Jesus Christ 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.**

The presbytery representative took issue that I would make such a judgmental statement, and that others, like myself, believe that sometimes dogmatic traditional theology might actually be harmful to others.

So, let us explore that issue. Can inclusiveness become an idol? To start with, I would probably be found guilty as charged of often being a “one note preacher” – that one note being inclusiveness. As in the inclusive love of God, and our call to be inclusive of others, all others. So, when it comes to interpreting scripture, here's a 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, to be fully accepted in one's hometown. Also, 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 their message is rejected, 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 of inclusion deserve more any attention than a hundred other biblical themes? 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 as we are commanded. We call this inclusiveness being Christ-like.** More recently, it's become part of the definition of being “**woke**”, a moniker most of us proudly wear.

Most importantly, **a message of inclusiveness 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 for God, yes. Fear, as in being afraid of God, no. For as stated in 1 John 4, “For God is love... There is no fear in love, but **perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment**, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. I'm not sure how those who claim to be good *God-fearing* Christians deal with that.

Therefore, **if by leaving behind theology that is oppressive is considered as making inclusion into an idol, then guilty as charged.** I, and most if not all of you here today, 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.” Flunder and Brown-Troutt go on to explain:

The theology of those at the center of society often seeks to characterize people on the edge as enemies of God. This is especially true when individuals or groups unrepentantly refuse to conform to the dominant definition of **normativeness** [as in those who challenge the status quo].

Overcoming oppressive theology, or a theology that excludes certain people, is critical in creating a Christian community for people on the periphery. 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 part of this community of faith fit that description of sometimes feeling like you're on the periphery, in that you 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, “**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 of those millstones 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 oppressive theological millstones from around your own neck, as well.

Finally, I closed that "idolatrous" 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 diving into the deep end of the pool, 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 1999 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? My response today is that **worshiping inclusiveness, making it our Ultimate Concern, would indeed be idolatry. But on the contrary, what we are worshiping is the living God, the Sacred Presence beyond, among, and within all of creation, who is radically inclusive. We are called to be and do the same, to overcome oppressive theology that binds, and be set free.**

That's not making inclusiveness and idol.

Amen.