

The Radically Inclusive Faith of Jesus Christ
Mark 10:13-27
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(Mark 10:13-27 NRSV) People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. {14} But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. {15} Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." {16} And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. {17} As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" {18} Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. {19} You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" {20} He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." {21} Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." {22} When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. {23} Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" {24} And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! {25} It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." {26} They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" {27} Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

During some recent reading I came across this remark by Don Cupitt, he made it in his book called *Reforming Christianity* in 2002. He wrote: "What Jesus preached was 'the kingdom'; what he got was the church!" Wow, ever since I read that I have pondered over its meaning.

I grew up in a pretty typical suburban United Methodist Church. As a child growing up, I always saw the church as a safe place for me to hang out and figure out who I was. It was a place where you would often find my friends and I playing basketball, or wiffle ball in the church gym — or football or softball out in the lawn if the weather was good. The church that I

experienced as a child was a loving and safe place — a place of open doors and acceptance.

Back in the early 70's, the church that I grew up in sponsored teen concerts in the basement of the church a couple of times each month. It was for kids in Jr. High and High School, and the place would be packed for each event. A couple of kids from the church were hired to clean up after the event — generally we would do it that night, but occasionally we would finish up first thing Saturday morning.

Why am I telling you this? Because it was early one Saturday morning that I experienced the Church!

As I said — my experience of the church had always been one of love and acceptance — a place where anyone could find a home.

One Saturday, when a couple of us were cleaning up the mess (and it could be a huge mess) from the big youth event — we were cornered by some of the “saints” of the church. Instead of cleaning, we were grilled and reprimanded for the “kind of people” who were coming to the youth night.

For the first time in my life — but unfortunately not for the last time — the doors of the CHURCH were slammed shut. Within a few weeks, the teen nights that had been drawing upwards of a couple hundred kids were cancelled.

As we close our series on being a good neighbor, I have chosen to call this final sermon: **The Radically Inclusive Faith of Jesus**, because I believe that is the kind of faith that God wants all of us to live.

Too often, the church has been a place of exclusion - where only like minded, like cultured people are welcome.

A few months ago, I was asked to write a column for BUILDING INDIANA, a magazine for business leaders in Northwest Indiana. One of the statements I made in my article was that:

The wonderful thing is that even though we come from a variety of traditions: Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Muslim, Agnostic, it doesn't matter. Together we can work to make a better world. In the end, isn't that what we all really want? My God is big enough for us all!
Regardless of how we understand the divine, we are all God's children.

Someone recently read the article and took exception to a few of my comments. They wrote:

You also made the statement that “Regardless of how we understand the divine, we are all God’s children.” Did you instead mean that we are all created in the image of God? . . . We know that not all people are “children of God” based on the full council of scripture.

I believe we are ALL children of God — All made in God’s image. And because of that, we are ALL sisters and brothers.

And as I read the Bible — that is exactly how I understand Jesus. One who lived and taught RADICAL INCLUSION — welcoming all to come to the table.

Jesus talked constantly of the coming Kingdom of God — over 100 times in the Gospels that phrase is used. But the problem for most of us is — what is meant by the Kingdom of God?

Marcus Borg says that when Jesus spoke of the Kingdom, he was evoking a new social vision, which included both the social and the political — an inclusive kingdom so different from Herod and of Caesar that the system of exploitation and domination experienced by the people of his day would be a thing of the past.

Think about some of the things that Jesus talks about.

How about the Lord’s Prayer:

(Matthew 6:9-15 NRSV) "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. {10} Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. {11} Give us this day our daily bread. {12} And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. {13} And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. {14} For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; {15} but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

What are the two central concerns of that prayer?

1. Food for the day
2. Forgive our debt

When we recite the prayer we say “trespasses” but if you go back to the Greek that it originally was written in, you see that a better translation is forgive us what we owe — as we forgive those that owe us.

Jesus also tells us that we should “love our enemies”, and Jesus uses the illustration of a Samaritan (the despised race) to illustrate who is a good

neighbor.

Think some more: the message of the Kingdom wasn't just preached in the sermons of Jesus — it was practiced and celebrated in his life as he ate with sinners, healed people on the Sabbath, encouraged woman to think and learn — challenging the community in which he lived in radical and shocking ways.

But, like my email that I received — what about that passage from John 14.
(John 14:6 NRSV) Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

We could spend the rest of the day looking into this particular passage — but let me say quite simply — <<and if you want a more detailed study to come ask me>> — that Jesus never said this.

These words were put into the mouth of Jesus by the early church as they tried to separate themselves from Judaism.

Jesus whole life was one of welcoming people — not excluding people

Frederick Buechner has said

“One of the blunders religious people are particularly fond of making is the attempt to be more spiritual than God.”

— Thinking we have gotten God all figured out.

Marcus Borg says that when Christianity lets go of its claim to be the only true religion and accepts its status as one of the great religions of the world, it will have great credibility — not as a set of statements to be believed, but as a sacrament of the sacred —> a doorway to God.

The Kingdom of God has no doors that can be closed — it has no walls that can be built to keep people out.

As the United Methodist Church proclaims —

We are a people of Open hearts
Open minds
Open doors

Remember what Don Cupitt said:

“What Jesus preached was ‘the kingdom’; what he got was the church!”

So where are we acting more like the Church rather than the kingdom?

Where are we excluding people from God?

- poor
- women
- children/youth
- people of different races or cultures
- mentally or emotionally challenged people
- people who believe differently
- we don't even need to bring up the sexual issues, but don't we often exclude them as well

And by welcoming people doesn't mean that we agree with them, or what they do (there are both republicans and democrats within our congregation) — what it means is that we see them as children of God — as worthy of God's love as any of us are.

We have to keep working at it — recognizing our prejudices and biases — and at the same time remembering that the Kingdom of God is what we seek — not the kingdom of any of us.

Walter Brueggeman has said:

“The arc of the gospel is always bent toward radical inclusion.”

Why is it we think that God would exclude anyone?

Why is it we think that we know God better than someone else.

If we are going to be wrong — it seems to be that it is better to be wrong on the side of grace — on the side of the Kingdom — rather than on the side of thinking that I am right, and you are wrong.