

Sept 14, 2025

Inclusion for the Excluded

Lk. 15:1-10

Some of you will have heard me talk about this before but when my family and I moved to Osler 2 years ago we began looking for a church. We had just returned from Thailand and were coming home a little battered and bruised. Myself having gone through a long and deep depression that coincided with a massive deconstruction of my faith. Casadi having been pushed into much the same as a result of spiritual abuse. And each of our kids, along with us, struggling with the effects of having their lives uprooted multiple times. We were a bit of a hurting family unit.

But we knew we wanted a spiritual community even if we required a different type of spiritual community than when we left for Thailand in 2019. We knew we needed a community where we could be cared for and invested in while also having the space to heal, question, doubt and journey at our own pace. Within 1-2 Sunday visits it became clear to me that OMC had the potential to be that place and 2 small signs of this were: 1) a small postcard on the bulletin board that acknowledged the inclusion and welcome of the LGBTQ+ community in the life of the church (a sign to me of an inclusive DNA) and 2) the library that displayed numerous books by authors who had served as vital guides in my faith deconstruction/reconstruction including Richard Rohr, Pete Enns, and Brian McLaren...books that you honestly don't see in many church libraries. These revealed to me early on that OMC might be a place where anyone could be included and welcomed.

That theme of inclusion and welcome is personally very important to me so I became excited when I looked at the lectionary passages for this week and saw among them, Luke 15, which I believe speaks to this theme.

- A note about translations: I mentioned this at the semi-annual meeting last week but I appreciate reading from a variety of Bible translations as the different wording helps me see familiar stories and passages slightly differently. For the past while, I have especially appreciated reading the First Nations Version of the New Testament so that is version I will read from here.

“Tribal tax collectors and other outcasts would often gather around Jesus to listen to him tell his stories. But the Pharisees and the scroll keepers would complain about this. They would say things like, ‘This man welcomes outcasts to join him at the table and eat with him.’ FNV

The writer begins by describing the setting and we see that there are 2 groups present here. One group is made up of people who have seen or heard something in the One they call Jesus the Christ that has made them curious and has made them want to gather around this person and listen. This group is made up of “outcasts”. People who had experienced exclusion, stigma, discrimination. They were the ones who were supposedly not good enough, not moral

enough, didn't subscribe to the right doctrines or behaviors. Other translations use the term 'sinners'.

Then we have a second group that saw Jesus and were also curious to some extent or they wouldn't have been present. But they saw the type of people who were gathering around Jesus and rather than join, they stood back and complained and grumbled, saying "How could Jesus associate with these others?"

This is a familiar passage and sometimes when a passage becomes familiar it can lose its potency, we can gloss over it and forget how revolutionary it can be. This passage speaks to us about the inclusiveness and radical hospitality of Jesus the Christ. He made a habit of including those that experienced exclusion. This is God's heart.

Mary Schertz, in her commentary on Luke, states, "The growing crowd helps make Luke's point about the inclusiveness of the kingdom, the openness of the table hosted by Jesus in the kingdom of God." (p. 280). God's kingdom, God's shalom, is a place of inclusion, openness, welcome.

I have recently moved in to the pastor's office here and on the bulletin board Patty left a sheet that describes OMC's vision statement that we see on the front of the bulletin, "A Welcoming Christian Community for Peace." This document explains each key word more in depth and about the word 'Welcoming,' it says, "This is definitely a pro-active word that strongly infers being inclusive. It also embraces the standards of hospitality, which is highly valued in the Bible. There are no 'ifs' or 'buts' implied; in other words, all are welcome to our church, and no one has to change to be like us before they receive our embracing hospitality."

I don't know when this statement was adopted but it speaks to OMC's recognition of what is communicated in the start of this passage, that God is a God of welcome, hospitality, inclusion, *particularly* for those who have experienced exclusion in the world. And like many good vision or mission statements, it is both descriptive, telling us who OMC is, and also prescriptive, reminding us of what we want to continue pursuing.

So our passage begins by telling us about these two groups that are present where Jesus is and then it continues:

"On one of those occasions Jesus answered them with a story." FNV

Jesus notices the separation between groups and, as he has already been doing, tries to communicate again God's heart of inclusion and embrace. And he does this by telling a series of parables, stories to ponder, with the first story being about a lost sheep and the second, a lost coin.

"Who among you, if you were caring for one hundred sheep and one of the lambs wandered away, would not leave the ninety-nine and search for that lost lamb until you found it? Would you not put that lamb on your shoulders, hurry home, and invite your friends to a

celebration, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost lamb!’? In the same way, the spirit-world above will celebrate even more over one outcast who finds the way back home than for ninety-nine who are already safely there.”

“Let me say it another way,’ he explained. ‘What woman who has ten silver coins and loses one would not light a torch, sweep the house clean, and look everywhere until they found it? Then, after they find it, would she not gather her friends together for a celebration? In the same way, Creator’s spirit-messengers will celebrate when even one outcast finds the way back home.” FNV

Jesus tells 2 stories that communicate the same message. Part of what is interesting is his choice of characters for these stories. Remember, Jesus is telling these stories because he notices the religious folk muttering that the people who, in their eyes, should rightfully be excluded are being included. And in both stories Jesus chooses a protagonist that would be among those that would have been ‘excluded’ in society at that time: shepherds and women, people that were often looked down on and considered ‘less-than’ in that day.

A shepherd has 1 lost sheep out of 100. So they leave the 99 to search for the lost one. Now, at first blush it seems the shepherd is risking losing the 99 by leaving them to search for the 1. While we can’t know for sure from the text, it was common in that day for shepherds to watch over flocks together with other shepherds so perhaps the 99 were left in the care of another. But either way, the point here is that the shepherd is not willing to lose even one sheep. The shepherd wants ALL the sheep home.

And in the 2nd story, the woman loses 1 of her coins and searches and searches for it. She also has the other 9 coins, they aren’t lost. But she wants ALL her coins. All are to be included. And when that which was lost, becomes found...it is time to celebrate!

So if we think of the shepherd and the woman as representative of God in these stories, as teaching us something of who God is, I would suggest we can conclude that God is not about including some to the exclusion of others. God desires for ALL their children to be home. And also that God is a God of celebration, celebrating when their children find their way home to Them.

Now, I chose to read from the First Nations Version deliberately because I appreciate the imagery and language choice when it comes to ‘outcasts finding their way home.’ Other translations will use the language of ‘sinners who repent.’ But the language of outcasts finding their way home helps me think about salvation slightly differently. It helps me think about salvation as a coming home, a finding my true place and true identity within God’s Community of Creation.

There are 2 prayers or meditations that have become important to me that I have in my office and that speak to this. One is a Tibetan Buddhist Prayer that goes like this:

“May you be at peace. May your heart remain open. May you awaken to the light of your own true nature. May you be healed. May you be a source of healing for all beings.”

The second is a Celtic prayer that says,

“Awake, O my soul, and know the sacred dignity of your being. Awake to it in every living soul this day. Honor it, defend it, in heart and mind, in word and deed. Awake, O my soul, and know the sacred dignity of your being. Awake, O my soul.”

These two prayers remind me of what we’re taught in the creation story in Genesis about humanity being created in God’s image. A story that, I would argue, is not a literal description about how the world and humanity came to be as if it were a scientific textbook, but is a story that communicates to us that Creator is good, and creation is good and there is an inherent worth to each person, each aspect of creation.

So as we look at today’s passage one of the things I see is Jesus attempting to help people awaken to their true nature, the sacred dignity of their being, their worthiness of inclusion in God and God’s desire for their inclusion.

Now, as I read this passage I am also reminded that as humans, we can often go one of two ways here. Too often we can be like the 2nd group that would rather stand back and complain about who is included. We can be focused on who is sinning, how they are sinning, how they should be punished, how they aren’t believing or acting correctly, etc. And in the act of standing back in judgment we then exclude.

But another direction we can go in that is also hazardous is that we can see how Jesus includes those that experience exclusion and in our earnest and commendable desire to follow Jesus’ example, we can justify excluding anyone we deem ‘Pharisee-like’. We can look at those who we see as excluding others and we then justify excluding them. And honestly, this can be my tendency. In my heart I can want to exclude anyone I deem as exclusionary, discriminatory, anyone exhibiting an ‘Us vs. Them’ mindset and in so doing, I too am exhibiting that same mindset. This is a continual struggle for me.

And so it becomes important for me to return to this story and remember that Jesus, I think, was communicating the inclusion of all **even as** He exhibited special attention to those that society excluded. In this passage we see Jesus welcoming the outcasts and eating with them but just a chapter earlier we see Jesus accepting an invitation to eat at a Pharisee’s house. So it was not that Jesus was excluding one group for another. God’s heart is ultimately for all people. I see it not as an ‘either/or’ issue like including either one group or the other, but as a ‘both/and’ issue. God’s heart is for the inclusion of both groups in this story, the inclusion of all, **and** Jesus also exhibits special attention to those society has excluded because of the way they’ve often been mistreated.

I mentioned a few authors briefly at the start that have served as important Guides in my faith journey. Another one is an artist by the name of David Hayward. He goes by the

moniker 'Naked Pastor' because he is a former pastor who was very up-front, honest, and vulnerable about his journey of faith deconstruction that led him to ultimately leave pastoral ministry. I've found his art is often able to straddle that line of communicating something deep and powerful but in a way that can provide some levity and humor. So I draw attention to this piece, Jesus Eraser, because it speaks to what we see in today's passage: our human tendency to draw lines of division, judging who is in and who is out, while all the while Jesus is busy erasing those lines of division that we deem so important.

Now, as I was meditating on this passage one more thing came to mind that I want to highlight before I close. So while I believe it is true that this passage and others reveals to us God's heart for the ultimate inclusion of all in Their Kingdom/Kindom... I also believe it to be true that this does *not* mean that you as an individual are responsible to or should 'include' everyone in your life. Now, that needs some explaining.

Most of you know that most of my education background is in psychology and counselling. Mental health is a priority for me, it is something I value and take seriously. An author of one of my favorite books, Paul Knitter, stated, **"If a belief makes for bad psychology, it probably makes for bad theology."** By this I think he meant that if something we are teaching about God or about the Bible causes mental/emotional/spiritual distress and unhealth in a person's life, it is good practice to revisit and rethink what it is we are teaching and believing. This does not mean that any belief or teaching that causes discomfort is wrong. But it does acknowledge that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. That walking with God should bring this fruit in our lives and should result in deeper love, deeper peace, joy, good. So if what we are teaching or believing is not ultimately bringing about this fruit, I think we can rightly question if it is of God.

So why am I going on this tangent? Well, as I examine some of what has been taught in the Christian church through the years I can see that the imperative to include can be and has been used to bring harm to people. And this is what I mean. Too often it has been taught or communicated to people that God wants them to forgive and welcome back into their lives people who have caused incredible harm to them, to reconcile quickly without actually dealing with the harm that was done. And in so doing, Christian leaders and churches have heaped even more harm and trauma onto people. And I do not want that to be what anyone hears from this sermon. Again, this is tangential to our passage today and is not meant to contradict or undermine in any way the fact that Jesus is teaching the inclusion of all, and the inclusion of the excluded, in God's heart. I want to make that clear.

So yes, God's heart is ultimately for the inclusion of all. But this also does not mean you as an individual need to welcome or include any and all people into your life. The wise teacher in Ecclesiastes wrote that "There is a time for everything," and that there is "a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing," (3:1, 5).

It is another both/and statement. It can be true **both** that God's heart is for the inclusion of all people in their kingdom and particularly those that have been excluded, **and** that you as an individual can 'refrain from embracing' at times. You do not need to rush into reconciliation if a particular relationship continues to be unsafe and unhealthy. I hope I am communicating that clearly and there is more I could say there but feel free to push back on this.

So several comments to summarize and wrap up:

- I believe in this passage (and elsewhere) Jesus is communicating God's heart of radical hospitality, God's desire for the inclusion of everyone, particularly those that experience exclusion from society. Speaking to our current time it is why I want OMC and the Church at large to be a place where any and all people can 'find their way home' in the words of the First Nations version. People of any and all ages, races, cultures, beliefs, orientations, gender expression, relationship styles, socioeconomic standing, citizenship, etc. I want to see the Church be a welcoming place, a place that offers belonging to anyone wanting to 'come home' and see the sacred dignity of their being. Judging by OMC's statement that I read earlier I trust this is our heart as a congregation, to be a welcoming community.
- Speaking of coming home and realizing the sacred dignity of your being...we can celebrate those moments. We see the shepherd and the woman in these stories inviting others to celebrate with them when that which was lost becomes found. Walking the road with Christ is a continual process of discovering more and more that sacred dignity of our being, our true nature in light of God's true nature. It is good to acknowledge and celebrate these moments, big or small.
- And lastly, I want people to know that even as God's heart is for the inclusion of all and that is what we as a church want to be about, it is also God's heart that you as an individual are cared for and loved and if you including a particular person in your life right now would bring further harm and deeper trauma, it is ok if now is a time to refrain from embracing. This may be a tangent off of today's passage but was something I wanted to include nevertheless.

So may we continue to experience and show God's heart of radical hospitality and welcome to those that need it most in our world.

So in closing, here is my prayer for each of us:

Awake, O my soul, and know the sacred dignity of your being.

Awake to it in **every** living soul this day.

Honor it, defend it, in heart and mind, in word and deed.

Awake, O my soul, and know the sacred dignity of your being. Awake, O my soul.