

What Would Jesus Say About... 3. Inclusion and Diversity

Luke 10:25-29; Galatians 3:26-28

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I hope a church would say to me: no matter who you are or what you've experienced, you have been created in the image of God and you will be welcomed here. This video was produced by New Hope Church, a megachurch located in North Carolina and with campuses nationally and internationally. The message resonates with our theme for today. This is the third part in our series about what Jesus might say about some of the major issues that our nation is facing. Today I want to talk about inclusion and diversity – and to see these issues through the lens of scripture: What would Jesus say about inclusion?

Last week, I was going through a box of books and came across my high school yearbook. It had been decades since I paged through this yearbook – and what I noticed now that I didn't notice when I was in high school was how everyone in my school looked like I did. I grew up in a small farming community in southern Minnesota, and there was not a single person of color in our town or school. In fact, I had never spoken to a person of color until my senior year when we heard a foreign exchange student was coming from Brazil, and she was black. That news alone prompted a lot of speculation that summer – all of it was false, based on stereotypes that I guess we had learned from I don't even know where. It was a small town built on sameness. The only diversity that I recall was whether you were Protestant or Catholic, and Protestants and Catholics didn't mix much. When I was in high school, a group of Protestant and Catholic kids decided to plan an Easter Sunrise Service and we held it in (gasp) the Catholic Church. It was the first time I'd been in a Catholic Church.

And then I found the yearbook for my daughters. Their class was larger than my whole school – and though Wayzata is far less diverse than some schools in the Twin Cities, it was certainly more diverse than mine – and so were their friends. They had and still have friends of different races and ethnicities and even religions. And I think if I went back to my small town school today, I would see that it looks very different than it did 50 years ago. Every generation has grown up in a more diverse culture than the generation that came before.

Here's what's happened over the past 50 years. When I was in school, only 18% of the population were people of color. By the time my children reached school, 39% of school aged children were people of color. And today, it is nearly half of the population. On Thursday, I was speaking to the director of Bloom who told me a family had just visited the child care center, looking to place their child here and were surprised that Plymouth would have a child care center with such diverse children and staff. And that family saw this as a positive. I'm not sure my small town of 50 years ago would have felt the same.

One of the things I've learned through the years about social situations is that we have a tendency to look for people like us. Walk into a party or a gathering – if we don't see someone we recognize, we tend to look for persons who appear like us. And that's also true with churches. When looking for a church, most people are looking for a church that would welcome me and has people like me. It is what led Martin Luther King, Jr. to say "The most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, when many are standing to sing: In Christ There Is No East Or West." He said that 50 years ago. It hasn't changed a lot, but it is changing, and I hope it will continue to change, and I think that's a good thing.

One of the reasons it is changing is that the generations that have come after mine expect diversity. Last week, I was reading articles about the recent emphasis on diversity and inclusion in companies and higher education. What companies have found is the millennial generation and generation Z expect diversity in the workplace. "A staggering 77% of Generation Z employees reported that a company's level of diversity would seriously affect their decision to work there." (Ben Miz, Business.com) My own children wanted a more diverse community which is part of why one moved to Washington DC and the other to Los Angeles and even when they moved back, they looked for more diverse neighborhoods in St. Paul and Minneapolis.

When we turn to scripture, we find that the central ethic of scripture is how we treat our neighbor. That's true in both the Old Testament law of Moses and in the New Testament teaching of Jesus: to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus says, Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. How are we supposed to live? The answer is easy: love others – which of course, presupposes that we love ourselves. Two weeks ago, we looked at three core values: justice, righteousness, and mercy. I grew up with this understanding. *"Jesus loved the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loved the little children of the world."* It was an easy song for me to sing when everyone I knew looked just like me, but the world has struggled with this.

In 1920, women were first given the right to vote. I remember a conversation with my grandfather who was born in 1887. He was in his 30s when that happened, and he told me he didn't think it should have happened – and I think it's because he and my grandmother didn't always see things the same way. So why give her the right to vote? The first election in this country was in 1788, but it took another 132 years until women could vote. Why? Women were considered the weaker sex. Here's a cartoon from the early part of the last century – women's brains were filled with babies and getting married and puppies and chocolates – and their brains couldn't handle serious things like voting. Persons turned to the Bible: **the women should be quiet during the meeting. They are not allowed to talk. Instead, they need to get under control, just as the Law says. If they want to learn something, they should ask their husbands at home.** (1 Corinthians 14) Some people said if the Bible says that, then women shouldn't be our leaders or our pastors. But there were others who said the Bible was written in a particular historical context. It was a patriarchal society and Paul was addressing the world in which he lived. They said Paul's words were not expressing God's will for women but rather how people understood the role of women in the first century. And there are other passages where Paul says, **There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** (Galatians 3:28) This was the battle between Christians, but the more compelling argument was justice, righteousness, and mercy.

Or another struggle with inclusion was slavery and racism. Again, the Bible was used to make the case for slavery. There are over 200 verses in the Bible that mention slavery, and none of them say slavery is wrong. The writers of the Bible could not imagine a world in which there was not slavery. The Israelites were kept as slaves in Egypt for 400 years until Moses won their release from Pharaoh. But then we find laws in scripture to regulate how they were to treat their own slaves. **When a slave owner hits a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner should be punished. But if the slave gets up after a day or two, the slave owner shouldn't be punished because the slave is the owner's property.** (Exodus 21:20-21) In other words, it was okay to own slaves and beat them as long as the beating didn't kill them. And people turned to verses like this one to say it is God's will that there be slaves, but other people said, this isn't right. If a slave is our neighbor, then owning human beings cannot be right and cannot be part of God's will. In 1844, the Methodist Church divided

over the interpretation of these verses, and it would be another 95 years until the church came back together, because both sides turned to the Bible to argue their view.

Civil Rights issue of our time is how to treat persons who are gay and lesbian. LGBTQ persons who have been marginalized or made to feel like they don't count, and Christians are on both sides. The Bible contains six verses that reference some form of same sex activity. The question is are those passage more like the 200+ verses about slavery or verses that reflect God's timeless will about loving our neighbors. The debate is how we understand scripture with Christians on both sides. I've shared with you where I've come out after years of studying scripture – and to be completely honest, in my lifetime, I've moved on my understanding. Most compelling to me have been the friends, colleagues, and family members who are gay and lesbian and have helped me understand their faith. Some of the most deeply committed Christians that I know are gay and lesbian. So, I hold that next to what I understand in scripture, and I want all people to be included. But not all Christians agree on these verses and even persons I know and respect disagree with me. Even those who disagree still want this church to be a place where everyone is welcomed.

I've tried to be consistent in saying this ought to be a church where all are loved, and we don't have to agree on everything, but we will treat each other with respect and love. I also know that even talking about this topic makes some of us uncomfortable. To be honest, it would be easier for me not to talk about it. Nobody will get mad at me or leave this church, but then I receive emails like this one from a young adult who grew up in this church. He didn't come out as gay until he reached college. Today he is a committed Christian and active member of his church – and he credits that to what he learned from this church about faith and serving others, but he also wonders why we so silent on sexuality. He was left on his own to figure out faith and his sexual orientation, but he wonders what it would be like if another 10-year-old like him were to grow up *“in a Messiah that affirmed his sexuality, whatever it may be. Who heard that, no matter who he ended up loving, his sexuality was not to be condemned or even just tolerated, but to be celebrated and recognized as helping make him the creation of God that he is.”*

We gather here for worship before the cross where I think Jesus stands with open arms? What would Jesus say about diversity and inclusion? Jesus was constantly associating with people that other people considered less than or not worthy. Jesus looked at people who good religious people wouldn't associate with. One day, a religious lawyer came to Jesus and asked what must I do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus said, “You're a lawyer, what's the answer in scripture?” And he says, **“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”** And Jesus says, “Do this, and you will live.” But the man wishing to justify himself, says, “Who is my neighbor?” And that's the question still before us today – who is my neighbor? Who am I going to love like I love myself? Then Jesus tells him a parable.

It's the parable on which Martin Luther King preached on the night he was shot and killed. He had gone to Memphis to support sanitation workers who were fighting for a living wage, and many of them were white. He was there because he believed even poor white people deserved a chance to live. And in the parable, Jesus says a certain man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho and was attacked, beaten, stripped naked, and left for dead alongside the road. Along comes a religious leader who sees the man on the side of the road and crosses to the other side. Maybe he's thinking, it's a trap and if I stop, the same thing will happen to me. So he doesn't stop. Then, another Jewish leader comes along and sees the man on the side of the road and maybe he's thinking the man is dead already and if I touch a dead man, I'll be unclean and I want to be able to go to my religious meeting. Or maybe he's running late and can't stop.

But then a Samaritan comes along – an unclean Samaritan, a person that no Jew would ever get close to – The Samaritan sees the Jew, stops, cleans his wounds, places him on his donkey, and then provides for his shelter and care. And Jesus asks, Which of these was the neighbor?

Here's what Martin Luther King said about this parable. The first two who were religious people asked the wrong question. They asked, if I stop to help what will happen to me? But the Samaritan saw the man on the side of the road and asked: If I don't stop to help what will happen to him? So, which question are you asking in your life. Regardless of how you interpret scripture, I hope you are the kind of courageous Christian who would speak up for those who cannot speak up – who will ask, what will happen to them if I don't stop to help – if I don't reach out with compassion and love.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 18, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Eternal God, you have shown us the way of life in Jesus. We confess that we are easily distracted from his way. You have stretched out your hands to us through our brothers and sisters, and too often we have passed by. Forgive us, O God, and grant that we may be more faithful and constant in our love and service through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Monday, July 19

Scripture: Genesis 1:26-28, 2:18-23

Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth." God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground."

Then the LORD God said, "It's not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him." So the LORD God formed from the fertile land all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky and brought them to the human to see what he would name them. The human gave each living being its name. The human named all the livestock, all the birds in the sky, and all the wild animals. But a helper perfect for him was nowhere to be found. So the LORD God put the human into a deep and heavy sleep, and took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh over it. With the rib taken from the human, the LORD God fashioned a woman and brought her to the human being. The human said, "This one finally is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She will be called a woman because from a man she was taken."

Observation: A patriarchal Hebrew culture told the two creation stories in Genesis 1-2. Yet neither story cast male or female in an "inferior" role. It's clear in the Genesis 1 story, in which the story said, "in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them." People often misunderstand the Genesis 2 story's use of "helper" to depict the first woman. But the person most often described as a help in Scripture is God; your helper is the strong one who is capable of getting you out of a mess. Being a help does not imply being subordinate.

Application: What key message(s) do you find in the poetic archetypal lines of Genesis 1:27: "God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them." What essential qualities do you believe make up God's own image?

In what vital ways can human beings share in those qualities? What does this tell you about your worth and that of all other people?

Prayer: Lord, you've given all of us (not just me and people like me) your image from creation onward. Keep teaching me how to value our differences in the setting of our common humanity. Amen.

Tuesday, July 20

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42; Galatians 3:26-29

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me." The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

You are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise.

Observation: Jesus treated women as people! Most rabbis thought women couldn't learn and wouldn't teach them. Dorothy Sayers, the first woman to earn an Oxford degree (with highest honors), was a devoted Christ follower. She called Jesus "a prophet and teacher who never nagged at [women]; never flattered or coaxed or patronized...who rebuked without [demeaning] and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them...who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend." In Galatians, Paul followed Jesus. He boldly wrote that, in Christ, old divisions between male and female no longer applied.

Application: Jesus teaching Mary may seem normal to us. In his day, it was most unusual. It was not an isolated incident, either (Luke 8:1-3, Matthew 27:55-56, and women as the first resurrection witnesses, as in Luke 24:10-11). How does Jesus' model speak to attitudes and actions that still undervalue (and often underpay) women in homes, workplaces, or other settings?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we're enlightened, but we still too often hear jokes about women's driving or emotionalism. Guide me to discern and live beyond any gender labels that my heart still harbors. Amen.

Wednesday, July 21

Scripture: Matthew 15:22-29

A Canaanite woman from those territories came out and shouted, "Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession." But he didn't respond to her at all. His disciples came and urged him, "Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us." Jesus replied, "I've been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel." But she knelt before him and said, "Lord, help me." He replied, "It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs."

She said, “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters’ table.” Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish.” And right then her daughter was healed.

Jesus moved on from there along the shore of the Galilee Sea. He went up a mountain and sat down.

Observation: The regions of Tyre and Sidon (modern Lebanon) were Gentile territory, not Jewish. The disciples were no doubt nervously wondering “What are we doing here?” It appears that Jesus went there, at least in part, to teach them a lesson. His seemingly rude, nationalistic answers to the woman in need were like parodies of the disciples’ biased attitude. But the woman cleverly pressed her case. Jesus affirmed her faith and honored her request for help.

Application: Written words can’t show tone of voice or facial expression. If verses 24 and 26 were Jesus’ true view of this desperate Canaanite mother, what he did in verse 28 didn’t make sense. Might we understand the story better if we imagine Jesus with irony in his voice, and a twinkle in his eye? Clearly, in the end, Jesus honored the mother’s plea. How did his behavior rebuke and seek to change the outlook the disciples expressed in verse 23?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you weren’t about to let national or gender prejudice keep you from responding to this mother’s heartfelt plea. Give me a willingness to do all I can to respond to pleas for help, even from beyond my comfort zone. Amen.

Thursday July 22

Scripture: John 4:4, 9-10, 39-40; Ephesians 3:10-15

Jesus had to go through Samaria.

The Samaritan woman asked, “Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?” (Jews and Samaritans didn’t associate with each other.) Jesus responded, “If you recognized God’s gift and who is saying to you, ‘Give me some water to drink,’ you would be asking him and he would give you living water.”

Many Samaritans in that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s word when she testified, “He told me everything I’ve ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days.

God’s purpose is now to show the rulers and powers in the heavens the many different varieties of his wisdom through the church. This was consistent with the plan he had from the beginning of time that he accomplished through Christ Jesus our Lord. In Christ we have bold and confident access to God through faith in him. So then, I ask you not to become discouraged by what I’m suffering for you, which is your glory.

This is why I kneel before the Father. Every ethnic group in heaven or on earth is recognized by him.

Observation: In Jesus’ day, Jews hated Samaritans, a mixed race born of Assyria’s policy of wiping out the identity of conquered peoples (2 Kings 17:24). Samaritans hated Jews, who had snubbed their offer to help rebuild the Temple (Ezra 4:1-4). Each side’s hatred had hardened for 700 years. Yet Jesus didn’t fear or avoid Samaritans but reached out to them repeatedly. Ephesians 3 said God’s plan is to use God’s people, working together in the church, to restore our broken world to its intended total wholeness (Revelation 21:1-5). Clearly understood, God’s mission crosses all human boundaries.

Application: In Greek, “the many different varieties” in Ephesians 3:10 was one word - *polupoikilos*. It meant “many colored,” as though Paul was picturing God’s grace and wisdom as a kind of cosmic rainbow. In what ways have God’s grace and wisdom added richness and beauty to your life through contact with believers from other backgrounds? How can you help your church reflect that beauty to all whom we encounter?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you refused the path of fear and anger even when snubbed. Help me to live into your spirit as a member of your church and join in doing your work in our big, diverse world. Amen.

Friday, July 23

Scripture: Matthew 19:9-12; Acts 8:26-39

I say to you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.” His disciples said to him, “If that’s the way things are between a man and his wife, then it’s better not to marry.” He replied, “Not everybody can accept this teaching, but only those who have received the ability to accept it. For there are eunuchs who have been eunuchs from birth. And there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by other people. And there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven. Those who can accept it should accept it.”

An angel from the Lord spoke to Philip, “At noon, take the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.) So he did. Meanwhile, an Ethiopian man was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had come to worship. He was a eunuch and an official responsible for the entire treasury of Candace. (Candace is the title given to the Ethiopian queen.) He was reading the prophet Isaiah while sitting in his carriage. The Spirit told Philip, “Approach this carriage and stay with it.” Running up to the carriage, Philip heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you really understand what you are reading?” The man replied, “Without someone to guide me, how could I?” Then he invited Philip to climb up and sit with him. This was the passage of scripture he was reading: *Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent so he didn’t open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was taken away from him. Who can tell the story of his descendants because his life was taken from the earth?* The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this? Is he talking about himself or someone else?” Starting with that passage, Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him. As they went down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, “Look! Water! What would keep me from being baptized?” He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Lord’s Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing.

Observation: “Water! What would keep me from being baptized?” [*The most ancient manuscripts do not include what, in some versions, is presented as verse 37.*] He ordered that the carriage halt. Both Philip and the eunuch went down to the water, where Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Lord’s Spirit suddenly took Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. “You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” (Ephesians 4:4-5) In ancient Israel, Deuteronomy 23:1-2 banned eunuchs and illegitimate children. But Jesus welcomed into his kingdom even people most Hebrews barred. Jesus’ characterization of eunuchs matches the Roman description that lumped people who were intersexed (born eunuchs); who were castrated, often as an act of war (man-made eunuchs); and who voluntarily

became eunuchs on their own into a single all-encompassing category. Judaism would not have accepted the Ethiopian as a convert. The Holy Spirit led Phillip to baptize and fully welcome the Isaiah-reading eunuch into God's family.

Application: Ethiopians were also Gentiles and people of color. Yet that man, despite all those barriers to acceptance, was reading from Isaiah 53 and seeking to understand the message. The Bible is literally at our fingertips today, printed as well as on our computers and smartphones. How can you, like the Ethiopian, plan to read and understand the Bible more clearly?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when I feel confused, please keep sending people to guide me in your way. And when you call me to help someone else, give me the wisdom to transcend any barriers that might keep me from pointing them to you. Amen.

Saturday, July 24

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:7, 12-14

A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good.

Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. Certainly the body isn't one part but many.

Observation: The apostle Paul, guided by the Holy Spirit, called all followers of Jesus – the body of Christ. We know each part of our physical body adds to our well-being. But in churches or communities, we (often subconsciously) shut out some members of the “body.” Scholar Amos Yong wrote, “The weaker members of the body who are of central import cannot be excluded from being channels of the Spirit's manifestations...God freely distributes the Spirit's [gifts] to all members of the body so that each one can contribute to the common good of the body...people with disabilities are central to, rather than marginal to, the charismatically gifted body of Christ.”

Application: God gives each Christian gifts and talents that empower us to work with God to change the world for the better. But no one person receives all the gifts and talents needed. God wants each believer to fill a place that makes the overall body stronger. It is natural for all of us to tend to believe what we're involved in is the most important. Have you ever seen people with different gifts, ministries, backgrounds, or cultural preferences yield to the all-too-human urge to see other people or ministries as rivals for attention or resources? How can we allow the “same Lord” behind them all to help us avoid unhealthy siloing or infighting, so that “the body of Christ” can carry out Christ's mission in the healthiest possible ways?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you've called me to join with others in carrying out your mission in the world. I commit myself to use the gifts you've given me in harmony with other members of your body for your purposes. Amen.