

LEAD WITH LOVE

Generous Inclusivity



The concept of inclusivity is far from a new idea within the church. From the inception of the early Christian community, diversity of those joining the community of believers was just as varied as today. Greeks, Romans and other gentile believers, slaves, people of low economic status and civic leaders all were attracted to the message of Jesus Christ and his teachings.

As United Methodists, our commitment to inclusion is as strong as the early church. It is based in the concept of sacred worth. The newly revised Book of Discipline adopted at the 2024 General Conference states that all people are of sacred worth which means “every person, regardless of race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, or economic status, is inherently valuable and created in God’s image, deserving of full inclusion, justice, and dignity within the church and society.”

This foundational principle thus serves to guide our service to the world through our management of monetary resources entrusted to us by God.

For each day this week begin your devotional time with prayer:

Loving and gracious God, your handiwork shines in the abundance of life in your creation. It is a marvel to consider the diversity you have created. Lord, we strive to be like Jesus, to cross over those boundaries we create, with the intent to love our neighbor. We are ignorant to the stories our neighbors carry and so frequently we are quick to judge out of fear. Help us to be open, to allow grace to break open our hearts. Cure our ill habits that contribute to marginalization. Help us to be the shining light of inclusive love you have for us for we are all one in Christ Jesus. Allow the love of Christ to overflow in us. To share our blessings with the world so it may be transformed.

Day 1

Scripture: Acts 2:44 – 47

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

Reflection:

Perhaps you have heard of the concept of an “Acts 2 Church.” This is the passage that defines that concept and describes the beginnings of our Christian heritage. The early church cared for the community. Everyone contributed, some had wealth and that wealth was shared. Possessions were sold and the funds distributed to those in need. That is a radical idea for nearly all of us in our current culture. Our socio-economic focus is largely based on upward mobility and the attainment of monetary success and independence that doesn’t lend itself to communal resource sharing. In our current context, the challenge isn’t a call to sell all we have and give the proceeds to the church. It is however a challenge to figure out how to have a generous heart that continues the work of the church to seek out and include everyone. The Holy Spirit birthed this justice minded approach to monetary matters and is working in our community and in our lives right here and now. How might the Holy Spirit be inviting you to consider a more generous definition of inclusivity? In addition to monetary generosity, in what other ways can you lead with love in this new year?

Day 2

Scripture: Ezekiel 47:21-23

"So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have fathered children among you. They shall be to you as native-born of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord God."

Reflection:

Many of us know of or have personally experienced what it means to be treated "as family." A lifelong friend becomes known as aunt or uncle without any direct biological connection. Deep relationships produce feelings of brotherly or sisterly familiarity. The desire to be known and included is part of the human experience and the way in which we have been designed by God to live. Relationship is at the heart of this type of inclusiveness.

What is so striking about this passage in Ezekiel is that it goes far beyond relationship and beyond the commands found in Leviticus concerning aliens. God is telling the Israelites that as the land is allotted to the various tribes, not only are the tribes getting allotted property but so are the aliens among them! Sharing God's gifts with not those that are like you, with not those you may have deep and long friendships with, but aliens that are simply living amongst you. Land in this context is worth more than riches to the Israelites, and they are being told by God to give that land to the alien residing with them! That is God's idea of inclusive generosity.

When have you been the outsider that was included and how did that make you feel? Who are the aliens among you that you need to share

your God given gifts with?

Day 3

Scripture: Galatians 3:27–29

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

Reflection:

Have you ever received one of those exclusive offers? Maybe it was a special credit card or trip. You are but a select few. It seems that as humans we feel more worth when we are chosen to be part of a few rather than the whole. The Israelites are chosen by God to be part of God's plan of salvation for all, to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. It sometimes is easy to fall into the idea of superior thought. To be chosen is to be lifted up, usually above others. Yet God's choosing of the Israelites isn't to be exclusive but rather to be the beginning of something that is destined for all of creation.

In Bible study that may be something we become familiar with – the idea of God's plan of salvation being for all but when it comes to our practices, we tend to erect barriers based on ethnic, socioeconomic, or other demographic factors. Many of us go about our days not aware of exclusivity because we don't encounter those that are excluded. When we look at the early church and the beginnings, it was a melting pot. There were people from all strata of society. As we have seen, the leaders of the church helped people to understand that those barriers no longer existed. That no matter what or who you were grouped with, Christ and Christ alone gave you a new identity. As followers, we are all one in Christ Jesus – this is radical inclusiveness. As one in Christ we are called to be generous with the whole body not parts.

How are you challenged by generous and radical inclusivity? What fears exist that trust in Jesus Christ can't seem to conquer?

Day 4

Scripture: Luke 14:12 – 24

"He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

Reflection:

When we say yes to Jesus and begin to align ourselves to his ways, we

get challenged quickly. The parable of the great banquet is a stunning example of God's generosity and the expectations that Jesus embodies. "What's in it for me?" is a hallmark question that assumes there is a point at which we won't respond to something unless there is some level of reward for whatever it is we are asked to do. But this is antithetical to Christ's request that we give with no expectation of repayment in this life. Jesus assures us that God's expectation is given in the life to come.

The challenge is to recognize that as Christ followers, we have already been invited to participate in the giving of this banquet. To be inclusive hosts through our generosity which is modeled by our savior. When we start thinking of all the ways that God's gifts in terms of resources are ours, we start to bulk at generosity. When we restrict who we think should be deserving recipients of God's gifts, we like those in the parable miss the banquet. We can think of many reasons not to be generous with our money and time. But Jesus is clear with his expectations.

What are those barriers that you need to break down to actively participate in the banquet, here and now? Why is it hard for us to give without expecting something in return?

Day 5

Scripture: Ephesians 2:14 – 19

"For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

Reflection:

There was a lot going on in ancient Ephesus at the time of Paul's letters to that community. Ephesus was a large Roman port with a strong cult to the goddess Artemis. The cultic expressions through art, idols, and other commercial and temple endeavors made for booming business. There was quite a bit of resistance to considering the inclusive nature of the Christian church between new gentile Christ followers and existing Jewish Christ followers. Paul had his work cut out for him.

For nearly 3 years Paul continued his work across Asia Minor dealing with identity issues. Jews felt new converts needed to follow Jewish customs while gentiles were being urged to rid themselves of pagan customs. Unity of the diverse was Paul's message. The one body of Christ. Being urged to understand a new identity in Christ meant the diverse body had to work to see itself as one. To be generous to the other, inclusive of the other. To establish commonality of purpose and mission in Christ that made differences unimportant. It is a tall order – to give of your resources generously to a new order. We find it much easier to seek out those areas that align specifically to our way of thinking and invest in them. Paul's challenge is for us to elevate our understanding of alignment to Christ and Christ alone. It remains a challenge for the church today as much as it was in Paul's time.

Why do you think we still struggle with definitions of identity that are not based in the unity Christ offers? What would it mean for you to identify yourself as a disciple and servant of Jesus instead of definitions that exclude others? Explore how your resources are impacted by the way you identify.

