

October 25, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

The Inclusive Love of God

Jeremiah 31:7-9

*“See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor,
together; a great company, they shall return here.”*

Mark 10:46-52

*Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him,
“Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.*

Our spiritual practice of inward prayer and outward service is so that we will discover, claim, and grow increasingly into our true nature as those created and loved by God. It is the path of following Jesus who taught the central message: love God with your whole being, love your neighbor, love others, as you love your own life. I think the spiritual life, the life of faith, is about allowing ourselves to expand in our capacity for love, for seeing our own lives in a caring, attentive relationship with everyone and everything around us, the whole of the creation of which we are part. This growth in love involves the sometimes difficult and painful work of overcoming the walls, the separations that are within us. These are the things that cause us to be afraid, and in the extreme, to speak or act violently toward others, or destructively toward the creation.

There are two movements, or mindsets, at work these days in our society and world. And we find them in ourselves, as well. One is the movement to **exclude**, to limit, to constrain people and life. These persons are acceptable, these persons are not. These persons can have a voice in how things go, these cannot. These persons deserve my acceptance, these others do not. We have seen this in the attitudes and actions toward African Americans, Native Americans, women, people with disabilities, those with different sexual orientations and gender identities, and others who have had to struggle for equality, and still are struggling to have their voices heard and their lives respected. The other movement is, of course, that of **inclusion**, of working to give all persons their rightful place in our society and world. This

tension between inclusion and exclusion, acceptance and rejection, has been and is found also in religion and in the church. Who has the right beliefs and who does not. Who is acceptable to God and who is not. Who is a “real” Christian and who is not. Who is welcome at Christ's table and who is not.

We find the same movements or tendencies within our scriptures. Some portions have to do with the excluding or condemning of those deemed unacceptable or unholy. But the dominant portions have to do with the nature of God as inclusive love that abides everywhere and embraces all, especially those who are excluded by religion and society. This is abundantly evident in Jesus' life and teachings, as he encounters opposition from the establishment because he enjoys the company of “tax collectors and sinners”, those who have been judged and condemned, excluded by those in power, whether political or religious.

Let's look at today's story from Mark's gospel with this in mind. Jesus and his disciples are leaving the city of Jericho, about twenty miles out from Jerusalem. This is the last story before Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final week of his life, to face rejection, suffering, and death because of his utter faithfulness to God.

A blind beggar, sitting by the roadside, calls out to Jesus. “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Maybe he senses that Jesus might truly be the expected messiah, and will be able to restore his eyesight. In those days, and we could argue that it continues today, blindness was not only a personal physical limitation but also a social debilitation. The blind, along with those otherwise physically impaired, were simply left out. They were on the margins of society, the objects of neglect, or of pity and dependent upon random acts of pious giving. They were certainly not persons who had equal standing in society or religion. Again, we ask to what extent it might still be so today.

Whether the crowd standing by or the disciples traveling with Jesus, people try to quiet the man. The word used here is translated well as “sternly ordered”. It is the way we speak to those with whom we are frustrated or of whom we are ashamed, or who make us feel guilty. We want to shut them up, if not just go away. But Bartimaeus will not shut up or go away. Then the text says that Jesus “stood still”. For some reason, these words grabbed my interest, so I look up the Greek. The word means standing your ground, making a stand. It is not simply stopping or pausing. There is a deliberateness about it. While those in Jesus'

company, his followers or would-be followers, are trying to exclude, to shut out, this man, Jesus stops dead in his tracks and makes a stand! “Call him here,” says Jesus. It is a firm order. The disciples call the man, and he throws off his cloak, leaps to his feet, and comes to Jesus. Jesus' compassion breaks through and silences the voices of exclusion.

This sounds familiar, right? Not long ago we had a reading from earlier in this amazing tenth chapter of Mark's gospel. Parents wanted to bring their children to Jesus so that he might touch them and bless them(10:13-16). The disciples did the same thing. They stood in the way of children, because children were not—and still are not—fully recognized and treated as persons of value. They were only potential adults, of no value until they could “contribute to society”. Jesus did the same thing. He ordered the disciples to let the children come to him. Furthermore, he told the disciples that unless they became like little children, they would never enter the kingdom of God. They showed by their exclusive attitudes and actions that they did not yet understand God and what God's love is about. In that story, it was about excluding children. In this story, it is the blind man and his faith, his desire to come to Jesus, that runs into the mindset of exclusion, but ultimately finds the inclusiveness of Jesus who embodies God's love.

Jesus was aware of and stood in the spiritual lineage of the prophets of Israel. At the core of the prophets' message was the love of God that both condemned the exclusiveness of Israel's treatment of those at the margins of society and worked for the including and embracing of all people, especially those at the margins. Our reading from Jeremiah is no isolated message. The prophet is speaking of how God would bring the people back from exile to their homeland once again. Those scattered by the fall of Israel to the armies of the Babylonian Empire would be reunited and returned home. And the prophet makes a special point to say that God's redeeming, saving action would include “the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together” with all the rest. The blind, the lame, pregnant women, widows, orphans...these are persons who represent ALL in Israel's society who were considered unimportant and without standing. This message is the same today, speaking of those who are left out, neglected, and the first to suffer when decisions are made by those in power. These very ones are the objects of God's “standing still” in compassion and justice, and embracing them equally and especially in love.

God's love includes. It does not exclude. We CAN say that God's inclusive love DOES

exclude, or hold accountable, those who are busy excluding others, whether in the realm of politics or religion. This is why we need to be concerned when our own spiritual tradition—Jewish and Christian—is misrepresented by those who condemn and exclude others in the name of God, or of Jesus. I had a professor who said something that was very helpful and has stuck with me ever since. With regard to those who speak and act in harmful ways in the name of Jesus, there is the issue of what he called the “integrity of the gospel”, the good news of God's love in Jesus. It is not that we are attacking others as persons when we challenge ways of speaking and acting that harm people in the name of religion. We are showing concern for the integrity, the truth, the meaning of the gospel of God's love expressed and embodied in Jesus. At the core of all major religions—yes, Islam, too!--is the message of one God who is love. And yet, every religion, including ours, has within it those who will make their religion into an instrument of judgmentalism, hate, and exclusion.

So, Jesus restores the man's sight. Blindness is a theme in the gospels, especially spiritual blindness. Jesus' work is to open peoples' eyes, the eyes of their spirits, their minds, their hearts, so that they can see the world through the lens of God's love and compassion and justice, so that they can live as they were created to live. We find stories of Jesus healing people of physical illnesses and limitations, but they are a minor theme compared to the major theme of his working to heal people of their spiritual impairments and impediments. He calls people, he calls us, to the journey of opening our eyes and our lives to God's inclusive, all-embracing, love. I like the ending of this story. Bartimaeus regains his physical eyesight. What does he do then? Does he run off to tell everyone what Jesus had done for him? No. He follows Jesus on “the way”. That phrase “the way” was how the early Jesus community spoke of the life of following Jesus on the journey of faith. And that is what we are on, what we have committed ourselves to. An inward and outward journey of living in and out of the inclusive love of God. It is the journey of what Jesus does for us by opening the eyes of our spirits and enlarging our hearts and minds as we follow him “on the way” of living out God's love for the world.