

## **GOD'S KINGDOM IS BIGGER THAN YOU THINK**

**Isaiah 56:1: 6-8**

**Matthew 15:1-9; 21-28**

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**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

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We've all experienced being snubbed or marginalized in one way or another and you remember what it felt like. As children, we can recall being excluded from the fun and games during recess, being informed or some snarky kid saying you alone were not invited to a classmate's birthday party, and maybe you've even been told outright nobody wanted you around, so get lost.

If you ever did experience being ostracized, it was because at least one of your classmates targeted you as the outcast and everybody else fell into line.

Rosiland Wiseman's book entitled *Queen Bees and Wannabes* observed how one girl assumes the role of Queen Bee, usually because she's pretty or rich, and then surrounds herself with girls who desperately "wannabe" her friends. This theme was popularized in the movie "Mean Girls," about a small group of classmates and their reign of terror at their high school.

Of course, boys are equally guilty, basing their own pecking order on athletic ability, personal appearance and their carefully groomed reputations. And yes there was also a movie, "The Lord of the Flies," showing how boys dividing themselves into haves and have not's can lead to tragic results.

In my early twenties as I started getting involved in youth ministry, I observed up close the behaviors and social structures of high schoolers and then reflecting on my own recent high school experience, I came to realize the oppressive pecking orders kids impose on each other is motivated by fear. Everybody in high school, from the most popular kid to the lowest outcast, is scared to death his weaknesses will be exposed, so some empower themselves, at the expense of others, to protect their fragile egos and reputations.

These adolescent defense mechanisms follow us into adulthood, and unless we repent and unlearn these sinful behaviors, we'll continue to separate ourselves into exclusive groups according to race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, social class and religion.

Jesus' primary objective was to die for the sins of the world, but an almost equally important objective was to expose our sinful behavior, in this case to show us how destructive and dehumanizing social structures can become when intentionally set up to exclude others.

A quick read of the gospels shows from the beginning of his ministry Jesus faced growing opposition from the religious elites who set up their own exclusive social networks. The scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees (the popular kids) were determined to protect their structures that served them so well from the tax collectors and sinners (the unpopular kids).

But we can't accuse them of opposing Jesus for purely selfish reasons. They could claim, with justification, they were protecting God's covenant with Israel, struggling to keep the faith pure, free from corruption and most of all creeping paganism. They were on firm ground when they argued Roman culture was polluting Judea's religious life and their fellow Jews were falling away from faith and practice.

What's more they had selective scriptures to back them up, and I say selective because the Law of Moses contradicted itself on how Jews should behave towards non Jews.

In Exodus we read, "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 23:9) In other words, "you remember what it's like to be excluded and how you suffered under your Egyptian taskmasters, so don't do it to others."

But then Deuteronomy reads, "When your God brings you into the land you are about to enter and occupy and he clears away many nations before you...and when the Lord gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them...show them no mercy." (Deuteronomy 7:1)

As the centuries passed Israel's faith matured, and new voices called for a new way to deal with Gentiles. Instead of destroying your enemies, turn your enemies into your friends.

The prophet Isaiah was one of those voices trying to change the conversation as he realized there were Gentiles (or foreigners) who wanted to abandon their pagan religions and enter into the covenant with the God of Israel.

*And to the foreigners who join  
themselves to the Lord  
to minister to him, to love the  
name of the Lord  
and to be his servants...  
these I will bring to my holy  
mountain,  
and make them joyful in  
my house of prayer...  
for my house shall be called  
a house of prayer  
for all peoples. (Isaiah 56:6-7)*

In other words the popular kids need to accept and make room for the unpopular kids.

Earlier I said the scribes and Pharisees were very selective in their use of scripture. Case in point: even though they honored the Prophet Isaiah they didn't always practice what he preached.

Not Jesus. He welcomed Jews and Gentiles, tax collectors and sinners, even scribes and Pharisees as he expanded the Kingdom's reach. Apparently he took God's promise to Abraham, "Your descendants will be a blessing to all the nations of the earth," more seriously than the Pharisees. Though there's no record of this in the Gospels, Jesus had to ask at least one Pharisee, "How can Israel be a light and blessing to all the peoples of the earth if you exclude and marginalize them and insist on being a hermit kingdom?"

In today's gospel lesson we find Jesus roundly condemning the Pharisees, saying, "So for the sake of your tradition you make void the word of God. You hypocrites, Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said,

*'in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts  
as doctrines''* (Matthew 15:6-7)

Almost immediately after venting his pent up frustrations, Jesus encountered that poor Canaanite woman begging him to heal her daughter. Uncharacteristically Jesus ignored her until she knelt before him pleading for help. But then he blurted out, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Why in heavens name would Jesus snap in such a hateful way? Could it be possible that just coming from his confrontation with the religious elites, Jesus' harsh rejection, not unlike today's stand-up comedians, was a mocking satire of the Pharisees' narrow-minded attitudes, mimicking their canned talking points? And could it also be possible that Jesus acted this way for the benefit of the disciples who just heard their Rabbi condemn the Pharisee's prejudice and then, when the Canaanite woman came along the disciples disappointed Jesus when they too showed her no compassion and tried to chase her away.

Anyway, that's the best explanation for Jesus' outburst I've ever come up with. Maybe the Canaanite woman realized this when she answered his nasty remark with the witty comeback, "Yes Lord, yet even the dogs (the actual word she used was 'puppies') eat the crumbs that fall from the table." Hearing that, Jesus complimented her for her faith and the child was instantly healed.

I don't think Matthew included this story just to report another healing. The bigger story is Jesus expanding the Kingdom's reach, in defiance of the religious elites, because the time had come for Abraham's children to make good on God's promise to be a blessing to ALL the nations of the earth.

Even today too many Christians are spending too much time deciding who's in and who's out of God's Kingdom. Wanting to insure the purity of the Church, like the scribes and Pharisees before them, they selectively choose some doctrines to make their case, but ignore other scriptures revealing God is more merciful than they are. Even so, they still cling to their preconceived notions and close themselves off from the very people they're meant to love and serve. Maybe they forgot what it was like to be excluded and marginalized when they were in school and maybe we all need to repent when we catch ourselves welcoming some but excluding others.

Christ's Church isn't a private club. We're supposed to be a faith community, a light and a blessing to everybody, not just the people who look and act like us, but especially those who've been excluded because of their social class, race or lifestyles.

I'm not advocating watering down our beliefs and doctrines any more than Jesus did. What I am advocating is breathing new life into our beliefs and doctrines so we can be Christ-like not only in our faith, but especially in our practice of welcoming and befriending the stranger.

Our next hymn, Onward Christian Soldiers, has fallen in disfavor in recent years primarily because it's been interpreted as an expression of militant Christian triumphalism.

Onward Christian soldiers  
Marching as to war  
With the cross of Jesus  
Going on before  
Christ the royal master  
Leads against the foe  
Forward into battle  
See his banners go

But listen to the first verse again carefully, "Onward Christian soldiers marching, not "off" to war, but "as" to war." Christ calls his Church to fight prejudice, greed, corrupt power systems, ignorance and any other evil you can think of. So instead of imaging marching armies with waving flags and warlike drumbeats, fighting to conquer each other, think of yesterday's and today's Christian martyrs, seeking justice in an unjust world, on the vanguard for human rights based on human decency. Picture in your minds the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian abolitionists and the 20<sup>th</sup> century freedom marchers. Visualize Mother Teresa holding in her arms a dying Hindu child, or Martin Luther King preaching fairness and brotherhood for all children be they red and yellow or black and white. And then imagine yourself, following in their footsteps, marching "as" to war to stand up against any attempt to exclude others from human society and God's Kingdom.

Above all, imagine Jesus, calling all people into the peaceable Kingdom where no one who answers the call is ever excluded but always welcomed.