

Our Inclusive Christ

Colossians 3: 1-3, 11-14

The Apostle Paul grasped the radical truth that at the banquet table of Christ, everybody has a place. If two people share Christ, that bond is stronger than anything that can separate them.

The First Century was filled with barriers between people. The Greeks saw themselves as the cultural elite. The Romans were the world's power brokers. The Jews saw themselves as God's favorites. Slaves outnumbered free people and were treated like animals. Women were usually treated like pieces of property.

Then came our revolutionary Christ and barriers began tumbling. Jesus violated social mores by hanging around with questionable characters: thieves, prostitutes, political radicals, lower class laborers. He laid hands on contagious lepers. Traditionalists were aghast at him for talking publicly with women. Jesus shattered every barrier between people that he could get his hands on.

The Apostle Paul carried on Christ's crusade. In his letter to the Colossians, he refers 29 times to "every person" as the object of Christ's love. Paul gloried in

the inclusive Gospel and the church of the open door.

Paul refers to four different kinds of barriers that Christ overcomes.

Paul wrote, In Your New Life In Christ, There Can Be Neither Circumcised Nor Uncircumcised.

Circumcision was the religious ceremony through which Jewish male infants were marked as Jews. Paul declared that to be unimportant. Circumcision represents all religious barriers which so often separate the people of Christ. Why is it that we Christians of various denominations often don't treat each other as brothers and sisters?

It really doesn't matter by which manner the church baptizes or how they receive Holy Communion. Good Christians can be as formal as the Roman Catholics or as silent as the Quakers. What really matters is, knowing Christ.

Paul then declared, In Christ There Is No Longer Barbarian or Sythian. If you call someone a barbarian today, that person might take offense. But in the First century, the term "barbarian" referred to all non-Greek speaking peoples. The word meant nothing offensive; it was just a synonym for foreigner. Paul was declaring that Christ transcends all national dividers; Christ opposes any narrow, exclusive nationalism.

I am proud to be an American, but I have an even deeper tie to the Immigrant who is my brother or sister in Christ.

The great Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, attended college in South Africa. He was well on his way to becoming a Christian, having been profoundly influenced by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. But one Sunday he visited a local church and was rudely turned away at the door. Gandhi vowed that day that he would never enter a Christian church again. Had it not been for some local church that failed to be the church, Gandhi might have become a Christian.

Paul declared that Christ transcends a third barrier. In Christ There Is Neither Slave Nor Free. This was the great socio-economic division of the First Century. Paul was declaring that Christ is bigger than the differences between the affluent and the poor.

Because of the current crisis in medical care, we are forcing hospitals to curtail their care for indigent persons. Dr. Edward Reed, a Memphis surgeon made this statement: "For the patients with no insurance, we will be telling them, 'You cannot get health care.' If society can live with that, God help society."

Let's suppose that you are a mother or father of a family of three children. One of those children has a life-

threatening illness. You as a parent would move heaven and earth to get care for that child. If you had to choose between new clothes or even education for several children in order to funnel more money to the sick child, that's what you would do.

Now, visualize God as the Creator of all human beings, including the sick, indigent ones. Don't you know that God would do almost anything to help those sick children?

We cannot make right the sins of our forefathers. But there are two things we can and should do: guarantee every citizen basic health care and education to help them provide for themselves and their families. What possible excuse could we offer to God one day for not doing these things?

Finally, Paul declared, In Christ There Is Neither Jew Nor Greek.

Paul was referring to the seething racial division that existed in his day and still does today. You may remember from biblical history that Jews were not even supposed to walk through Samaria because of the racial hatred between Jews and Samaritans. Jesus' noonday conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well was a frontal attack on the prevailing racism of his day.

I am convinced that the Church can help heal our racial divisions as well as the divisions over LGBTQ+ issues.

If we are going to help people to appreciate each other, we as a church must become more visible in our city.

We need more ethnic minority persons in Christ's Church we need more LGBTQ+ persons in Christ's Church. I refuse to accept the view that churches must always be typed as predominantly African American, predominantly white, predominantly Hispanic, or predominantly Gay or Straight. We, the Church need to break down the barriers that divide us and be the radically inclusive Church that Christ would have us be.

Allow me to suggest four resolutions for us if we would help the church of Jesus Christ to remove the barriers that exist.

First, never hesitate to invite a person to our church because of racial identity, gender Identity, sexual orientation, or any other difference that we might perceive. In other words, assume that any person can fit in here. Second, never allow a bigot of any type to bring out the worst in us. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "I will never allow anyone to drag me down so low as to make me hate them."

Bigots of all types appear on TV regularly. We read their comments in the newspaper. They seek to attack us as they tried in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, We must not allow them to trigger a reaction in us.

Third, resolve to develop a relationship which allows for an honest, candid exchange of ideas. Such relationships can reduce suspicion and promote understanding. And we will model for our children the way of the future. Just imagine how much easier it might be to solve the problems in our community if there were already in place healthy friendships that helped us to better understand and relate to one another.

Fourth, we should make sure that all organizations we belong to are neither officially nor de-facto exclusive regarding gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, mental and physical ability, age, race, nationality, economic and social status, faith background, marital standing and family structure. This includes religious, civic organizations and country clubs.

If a person is seeking God, it should not be very important to us what their gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, mental and physical ability, age, race, nationality, economic and social

status, faith background, marital standing and family structure may be. For regardless that person is our brother or sister.

We all belong to God and this congregation has said being an Open and Affirming Congregation we will open our doors to all people. We will be radically inclusive and offer extravagant hospitality to all God's Children. However, it does not and cannot end there.

We are now called to go out into the world and to fight for the rights and justice of all persons regardless of gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, mental and physical ability, age, race, nationality, economic and social status, faith background, marital standing and family structure. This is the call of Christ to the church today to carry on Christ's Crusade of breaking down barriers, to be radically inclusive and to offer extravagant hospitality to all of God's children. It is the call of Christ to us.