

“No Outsiders”
Luke 2:22-40; Psalm 148
First Presbyterian Church
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There were at least two types of persons waiting for the coming of the Messiah in Jesus’ day. There were those who were waiting for the Messiah to make them the masters of the world, where every knee would bow down to them, all the wealth of the nations would flow to Israel, and they would be under nobody’s yoke anymore. These were seeking power and dominance over all others. They wanted the Lord’s blessing that no one else would possess.

There was, however, a second group known as “The Quiet in the Lord.” They were in constant prayer and wakefulness before the Lord. Seeking the coming of his Messiah, they sought not world power or dominance, but rather they sought the soothing comfort of the Holy Spirit in hard times. They sought a Messiah who would bring peace and reconciliation to a divided and pain filled world. Simeon and Anna were of this group. Both were quietly waiting, and Simeon had the assurance that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Anointed, the Messiah, for whom so many had waited and yet not seen.

One can only imagine the joy that Simeon must have felt as the Holy Spirit touched his heart and told him that his wait was over as Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus into the temple. As he took Jesus in his own arms, the text says he blessed God. His words we will read from the Message Bible. “God, you can now release your servant; release me in peace as you promised. With my own eyes I’ve seen your salvation; it’s now out in the open for everyone to see: A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations, and of glory for your people Israel.” Jesus’ father and mother were speechless with surprise at these words.”

Why the surprise of Joseph and Mary? His conception and birth were surrounded by profound spiritual manifestations to both of them. They knew there was something special about this child; they had to know. But there appears to be shock in the light of Simeon’s words. Remember that the dominant vision held by the Jewish people was that the Messiah would be a warrior King, leading the Jewish people to victory against all their enemies. Their views were exclusionary. He was theirs, and no one else was welcome in the gate, if they weren’t of the house and lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “No Outsiders” were allowed. The reason Simeon’s words are so stunning is that they gave the words “No Outsiders” a totally new meaning.

The way Simeon spoke his words meant, too, that there were “No Outsiders,” but they meant that everyone was within the reach of the Kingdom of God. There would be no such thing as “An Outsider.” This baby would be “A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations!” Those who had historically been excluded were being offered the very same light and glory that was to be made visible to the Jewish people. No longer would there be “insiders” and “outsiders.” All

would be invited to share in the glory that the Messiah would bring with him. That was so counter-cultural that even Joseph and Mary, with their very special spiritual experiences, were stunned by that announcement.

But Simeon doesn't stop speaking at the point. He goes on to say that this goal will not be achieved easily, for there would be many who would stand against any such inclusion of people not like them. Many people would not be open to God's ways. They would founder on the rocks of Jesus' openness to all persons. Implied here is the next to last scene of Jesus' life in which he would be rejected by his own people, and those final scenes would reveal who stood on God's side and who stood against him. Those last scenes would bring extreme pain to Mary, as if a sword were driven through her heart, for she would lose her son. But we know that is not the end of the story, for in the final scene the light to all the nations explodes into view when the tomb is empty, and Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene, a woman!

This debate over whether people should be in or out is still going on today right before our eyes. It is so sad to see some people intent on excluding other people because they are different from them in some way. The knee-jerk reaction against DEI—Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—in this country is so anti-biblical that it is beyond me why so many people are opposed to it, other than for the fact that they are just trying to protect their own little patch from people unlike themselves. **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion** were the heart of Jesus' teachings, and should be the heart of our Christian lives.

Diversity began with creation itself. Just think of the glorious diversity of things created on this planet alone. If you are a geologist, for example, you can glory in the incredible diversity of the components that make up the very ground upon which we stand. Under our feet may well be lava which has bubbled up out of the earth's core. We may be walking on sandstone that is the vestige of some ancient lake as debris settled to its bottom. Quartz is a common stone that is almost diamond like in some of its forms. Granite makes up many mountain ranges. Marble is a beautiful stone that is often used to make gorgeous buildings, often government buildings or monuments. The metals, like gold, silver, aluminum, and copper also come from under our feet. There is no end to diversity in the geological world.

Likewise, if one is a biologist, there is incredible diversity in the living world. Walk out into your yard, and just look at the flora around you. What do you see? Ash trees, maples, oaks, sycamores, lilac bushes, and pines, not to mention the flowers, the grass, the huge collection of weeds, vines, evergreen bushes, and iris, if it were spring. The living world is a huge collection of diverse plants, all of which are a creation of God through his son, Jesus Christ.

And what do we see if we turn to the animal world. No lack of diversity there. If you have a bird feeder, just look at the diverse collection of little guys who show up. Ornithologists must have a hay day as they study the members of the feathered kingdom. Here in Wisconsin, we even have American eagles, along with the sparrows, the finches, the chickadees, the cardinals, the blue jays, the ravens, the nuthatches, the juncos, and the cranes. And if your backyard is

like mine, along with the birds, there are always a couple of squirrels trying to get into the bird feeders.

What about the human family? An Ethnographer can have his or her playground there. In Wisconsin alone there are eleven different indigenous groups of peoples, each with their own unique customs and behaviors, but all of them are children of God. He made them and gave them their differences. He didn't love one more than another. The human family isn't quite as diverse in Marshfield as it is other parts of Wisconsin, but we have Hmong people from southeast Asia. We have Muslim people from predominantly middle eastern countries or Indonesia. We have Indians from India. We have blacks who have come to this area looking for education or jobs. Built into God's order of things among human beings is incredible diversity, and to try to deny that is to deny God's very handiwork. There are "No Outsiders" in God's world.

In Simeon's pronouncement that Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles, he destroyed the supposition that there was inequality before God. No one was better than any other people, because Jesus had come to all peoples. His life showed that all were equal before him and in his presence, especially those who were on the margins. Included in his retinue, and unheard of for his day, were, heaven forbid, WOMEN!!! They were about as unequal as one could be in that society. They couldn't testify in court, because everyone knew they were liars. They couldn't study the scriptures. And yet, Jesus blessed them, first appeared to one of them after his resurrection, healed them, and welcomed them, something which many men will not do today. It seems that too many men believe that women don't deserve equality and haven't the brains to make their own decisions.

Jesus also made equal the poor and the destitute. It mattered not at all to him what a person's standing in life was. He loved them all, including the most unlovely of that day, the lepers. In the Chosen there is a beautiful scene in which a leper approaches Jesus, and his disciples draw swords and knives to keep him away. Jesus, on the other hand, approaches him, and when the leper asks to be healed, Jesus does so by touching him and then embracing him. What a lesson in EQUALITY for his disciples. They were much as we are, wanting to separate themselves from others and to have a special standing in the world. But we all have a special and equal standing before Jesus, for we are all children of God, equal before him and equally loved by him. Paul extended this equality all over the Mediterranean area, and for us in our day and time to once again try to make people unequal is a crime against Jesus and the Christian gospel.

INCLUSION is closely related to EQUALITY. The story of the Samaritan woman at the well, is indicative of that. She was an outcaste from her own society because of her lifestyle. She couldn't go the village well with her neighbors, because they had ostracized her. So, she was at the well alone when Jesus arrived. He didn't shun her because she was a Samaritan. No Jew was supposed to have anything to do with this mongrel people, but Jesus didn't care. Here was a daughter of God who needed to be healed mentally and spiritually. There was no way that Jesus wasn't going to include her, for he loved her as a sister. Again, in the Chosen, after Jesus

shows her that he knows all about her and blesses her, she runs into the town and becomes his best press agent. She tells everyone about him, for he has changed her life.

Jesus also makes a Samaritan the hero of one of his parables. He paints the picture of a man traveling to Jerico from Jerusalem, when he is mugged, beaten, and robbed, and left on the roadside. A religious man, a priest passes by, sees him, but walks down the other side of the road, so that he doesn't have to deal with him. A Levite, a man who works in the temple, also a religious person, looks and passes him by. He doesn't include a beaten man in the human race, apparently. However, an outcaste, an unclean man according to Jewish practice, a Samaritan, has compassion on this unfortunate, badly beaten man, stops, treats him, loads him on his donkey, and takes him to an inn where he pays for his care, and promises the innkeeper, if more is spent, he will cover it on his return journey. Again, all are included in Jesus' love. Inclusion is the watchword of his ministry.

What about us? Where do we stand on the question of DIVERSITY, EQUALITY, AND INCLUSION? Do we stand with Jesus, the Christ? Sadly, it appears that too many people in our country, many claiming to be Christians, do not want to follow Jesus' example and teachings. However, diversity is a fact of American life, thanks to our previous openness to persons from other countries. That, however, requires a society that is willing to accept those who need a home and a job. Everyone of us here is an emigrant at some point in our family history, unless, of course, we are indigenous people, and even the indigenous people came across the Bering Straits at some point in their history. None of us have any inherent right to be here. Thus, we have no right to exclude willy-nilly people simply seeking the benefits of life in this country.

God's order of the world is completely INCLUSIVE. Nobody is left out of his love. It doesn't matter whether it is admission to this country, life in a university setting, or admittance to a medical school—DIVERSITY, EQUALITY, AND INCLUSION are the only standards by which those of us who claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior can measure ourselves. To do otherwise is to deny the Christ who claims us. Brothers and Sisters, there is no place for us to go, if we deny the validity of the inclusion of all persons into our lives. To deny them a place, is to deny ourselves a place in God's Kingdom and to make a lie out of the sign outside which says, "WE CHOOSE WELCOME. That is exactly where we should stand, and I know that I have been preaching to the choir here today, but we need to advocate for what we know to be true, thanks to our commitment to follow Jesus in all areas of life. For us, there are never any "OUTSIDERS."

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.