

From exceptionalism to inclusion

Psalms 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32; 2 Cor. 5:16-21

From Security to Generosity. From Fear to Compassion. From Earning to Receiving. And today. From exceptionalism to Inclusion.

St. Peter and St. Paul are at the Pearly Gates. Paul is looking through The Book of Names, and he says to Peter, "There are more people here in heaven than there is supposed to be! Go find out what has happened!"

Peter runs off, and some time later he returns to Paul. Paul asks, "Did you find out why there are too many people here?"

Peter says, "It's Jesus. He's helping people in over the back fence again."

Jesus is the one who welcomes home those the scribes and pharisees and we believe do not deserve to be welcomed home. He is one who eats with sinners and tax-collectors and teaches them the joy of being re-united to God.

In Luke 14:15-23 Jesus tells the parable of the Great Banquet. The story goes: "Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes & compel them to come in, so my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'" When those who are considered exceptional, or think they are extraordinary refuse the invitation, Jesus becomes pretty aggressive in searching out "the streets and alleys and brings in the poor, the crippled, the blind & the lame." The invitation goes way beyond our kind of thinking.

The Elder Brother, the one who has always been responsible, the one who has always worked hard and asked for nothing in return, needs to learn to lighten up. His sense of what he has done and is doing has caused him to be too full of resentment - too full of anxiety - and too jealous. He thinks he is exceptional – special.

Our focus statement for this Sunday in Lent is: As we seek God's way, we move from a sense that "we" and "ours" have special standing - to

the knowledge and understanding that all are equally part of God's kingdom.

But everyone thinks they are special – in some way. People who focus on their own freedom, to the exclusion of other's freedoms, think they are special. Around the world, suspicion, greed, racism, & you name it, is usually tied to someone thinking they are better, deserve special exceptions, or whatever. Sadly, it's our nature.

The human point of view named in 2 Corinthians causes us to think we are "in" and others are "out." That was the tension in the early church about the Gospel being for Gentiles and about circumcision. And exceptionalism is part of the problem in most church fights over all kinds of issues. We need to ask – what part does the idea of exceptionalism play in our desire and attitudes for discipline and purity?

The elder son in the prodigal son parable, is stuck seeing from this perspective. He thinks his father should love him more, not his brother who left home, wasted his inheritance, and became a bum. The elder son struggles to see how blessed he is. The younger son experiences reconciliation, which can radically open our hearts to be welcomed and to understand God's welcome. The prodigal son is a new creation because he came home to receive his father's love. But the elder son thinks he should receive the best honors and privilege and attention for his good behavior. Aren't we all kind of like this?

We see this exceptionalism thinking in the history of Israel. They came to believe they were the only special people that God choose. It is understandable. Exceptionalism is the condition of being different from the norm. But God asked the Israelites to call the nations to Him. To be a light to the world. To attract and teach people about their Creator. Through them the families of the world would be blessed.

We are all like this in some ways – whether it makes us better than others, is always up for debate. My one sister and I, are the only ones I know who attended Morrison Academy in Taiwan – from kindergarten through grade 12. It

happened because my parents took the summers off to return to the States, instead of taking a year as most missionaries did back then. So, we are exceptional? We did not cause this. I do not know of anyone who recognizes this specialness – if it really is that special, but....

Each of us have some aspect of our lives that we can point to that are unique or exceptional. Maybe you have lived on the same property for a certain number of years. Maybe you think you have the best garden. Or you have the most powerful machinery in the community or most grain bins or.... Or maybe none of your children have come to the attention of the police. You have taken more cruises than anyone you know. Or you have been more than honest in your business dealings. Or....I'm sure you can name a few things that you can take appropriate pride in, that if we did some comparisons – you would stand out. I suspect if we really were honest, we would share how we think we are exceptional.

It's the same between people groups. Many wars and tensions have some thinking that ties in with exceptionalism. It's a dynamic with trade wars. Colonialism tied to religion had 2 purposes. One – we need your wealth because we are better people and can use that stuff best. Second – we know better than you – let us teach you. Today we don't want to be dependent on other nations, so we need to protect our businesses with tariffs. And how often have we thought or heard – I'm glad I'm not like that....fill in the blank.

Wikipedia defines Exceptionalism as: the belief or perception that a species, country, institution, society, movement, individual, or time period, is "exceptional." The term carries the implication, whether or not specified, that the referent is superior, better, more deserving, in some way.

Every country thinks they are exceptional. What would we claim is special about Canada? One is we are cheerful. Other claims could be, our quality of life on things like health care, schools, freedom, beautiful places, business, crime, culture, & so on. But we too have exceptional sin habits & thinking.

The point is, everyone thinks like this in some way that might be remarkable or not even special. And we take some pride in it. Even being more frugal than our neighbors or having a neater yard. Many are good values, but we better watch out. God has a viewpoint also.

A proud Irishman named Pat met St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. He was asked, "Who are you? Pat replied, "My name is Pat, I'm an Irishman, born on St. Patrick's Day, died on St. Patrick's Day, marching' in the St. Patrick's Day parade."

St. Peter said to Pat: "Yes, this is true! Here's a little green cloud for you to drive around heaven in. Here is a harp that, when you push this button here, will play 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling.' Enjoy it, Pat. Have a good time here."

Pat jumps on his little green cloud, punches the button, and heads out with a smile on his face and a song in his heart. He's having a wonderful time in heaven, driving his little green cloud around. But on the third day, he's driving down Expressway Heaven number 1, with the harp playing full blast when, suddenly, a Jewish man in a pink and white two-tone cloud with tail fins roars past him. And in the back of this big cloud is an organ which is playing all sorts of celestial music.

Pat makes a U-turn right in the middle of Heaven Expressway, charges back to the Pearly Gates. He says, "St. Peter, my name is Pat, I'm a proud Irishman. I was born on St. Patrick's Day, died on St. Patrick's Day, marching in the St. Patrick's Day parade. I come here to heaven, and I get this tiny, insignificant little green cloud and this little harp that plays only one song, 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling.' But there's a Jew over there. He's got a big, beautiful pink and white big two-tone cloud and a huge organ that plays all kinds of celestial music and I, Pat the Irishman, want to know why!"

St. Peter stands up, leans over and motions Pat the Irishman to come closer. Then he says: "Pat, shush! What makes you think you are so special? He is the Boss's Son!"

In heaven we are all the boss's daughter's and sons! And we will all be treated just fine - God will wipe away the tears from every face - and give joy to all who have come to him. There will

be no distinctions between the types of clouds that we sit on. Each family member will feast at God's table and sing praises at the throne. And what is so bad about that? What's so bad about the heavenly homecoming being so wonderful for everyone that we can't abide the thought of it being shared by everyone - even by those who come to their senses later in life and who at long repent and call on Jesus.

Jesus offers the parable of the vineyard workers to help us get over our ideas of exceptionalism & focus on inclusion. In Matthew 20, workers are hired at various times during the day, but they all receive the same pay. This means those people who consider themselves the most important in the Kingdom of God because of their good deeds, will be surprised. God's grace does not work like we think it should. In heaven there will not be the kinds of distinctions between people that we are all too fond of making.

The Father tells the older brother there are no special distinctions either. He tells him, in effect that he could ask for a young goat or a fatted calf at any time. He could have a party with his friends whenever he wanted. And he tells him that no matter what we must rejoice.

The point in the Bible is inclusion. It's more than being friendly, hospitable, treating people like we want to be treated & smiling at people. It's going out of our way, out of our routines, to invite people into our lives and to meet Jesus. The Bible & church history is full of stories of people extending themselves beyond their habits, their likes & dislikes, to be inclusive.

Frank L. Couch wrote: I experienced rags to enriching others in a most interesting place – the local gas station. I used to make a regular stop at a gas station at 6:30 in the morning on my way to work. It is an interesting mass of humanity that stands in line at the time of day – construction workers with muddy boots, businesspeople in suits, doctors & nurses in scrubs, teenagers ready for school – all a little bleary-eyed and buying what ever doughnut, candy, or caffeinated beverage they need to jump-start their day.

“Most of us tend to be a little grumpy at that time of day – until we are served a morning dose of exceptionalism. At that particular gas station, was Mary. She has not had an easy life. And working the shift from midnight to 8 a.m. had to be a challenge. But there was an unmistakable transformation that occurred from the moment a customer was in line to the moment they walked away from the counter.

“Mary knew everyone's name, asked them a personal question, listened, and then sent them on their way with an inspiring thought and sincere wish that they would have a wonderful day. Mary never failed. Mary was magic. Mary was absolutely exceptional (& inclusive).

Frank continues, “I remembered being weighed down one morning with the prospects of a difficult day ahead. After making my purchase and realizing Mary had just elevated my day in what could not have been more than a 37 second transaction, I stopped at the door & just watched for a few moments. It struck me that Mary was enriching & impacting lives in a most incredible way. She was clearly having a bigger influence on humanity than any business or political (or sports leader or media star) ever could.”

The Gospel tells us to forget our ideas of exceptionalism. Instead, we are called to become exceptional at God's amazing ways of inclusion. Really loving our neighbors. We are all prodigal children. It's tempting and easy to go along to get along with the values and gods of this world. But followers of Jesus are always challenged to be different as we deepen our walk with Him.

“So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.” (2 Cor. 5:16) We are Jesus' ambassadors of radical inclusion. And we are invited to the feast of communion we will have on Maundy Thursday.

“Your ways, O God, are higher than our ways. Your thoughts are higher than our thoughts.” Lord, help move us from our ways of clinging to exceptionalism to seek your way of inclusion of everyone. May we keep reimagining this familiar but key, Good News.