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Who Am I To Stand In God's Way?

John 13:31-35 and Acts 11:1-18

“Even to the Gentiles” say these disciples of Jesus. That seems so strange to me, that these disciples would be surprised that God loves even the Gentiles.

But it is a lesson worth hearing because I'm sure there are times when we too are surprised to find God in unexpected places. But God is indeed at work even where we least expect it.

When I read this story in Acts, I hear a story of radical inclusiveness.

Jesus' way is not about eating the right foods,
about following the right rules,
or about being proper.

God's love is not about whether you are Jewish, or Catholic,
or Protestant, or Buddhist,
or Hindu, or Muslim.

God's love extends to all people right where you are and just as you are.

The self-help guru Wayne Dyer relates another story of radical inclusiveness in his book “The Power of Intention” ...
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We may not always be perfect by human rules and standards,
but in God's eyes we are all perfectly worthy and loved.

Likewise, Jesus commands us to love one another: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This also is a statement of radical inclusiveness: that love is the defining characteristic of the followers of Jesus.

As many of you know, we at Phoenix have been through some struggles recently, but one of the blessings of this community has always been a desire to be a place of radical inclusiveness. A place that welcomes in and loves one another.

Tonight, we celebrate and affirm our covenant together between me as your pastor, Phoenix Community Church and the United Church of Christ. I am blessed and privileged to be able to serve you, but this is not just a celebration for me, this is a celebration of our community and our moving forward together.

We don't know for sure what the future holds, but God is at work here and, like Peter, we shouldn't stand in God's way. Like Peter, we need to follow the leading of the still speaking God even when it might go against what we've been taught is the proper thing to do.

I want to call us back to making sure our love for each other, for our neighbor, and for our God is our number one priority. Sometimes I think we might get off track and forget that loving one another is what we're supposed to be about as followers of Jesus.

And, if so, that is a very human thing to do.

Loving one another can be hard sometimes.
Love is more than just being nice to each other.
Love is respecting each other in our differences.
Love is accepting each other just as we are.
Love is being open to change and new perspectives.
Love is putting Jesus into the middle of our relationships

and seeing the Christ that lives in the other,
the Christ that lives even where we might not expect to find
Christ.

Love is being radically inclusive.

And what exactly is it I mean by being radically inclusive?

It is, I believe, largely forgetting about rules and dogma.

It is about love,

about recognizing and appreciating the Christ, the divine worth,
in all people.

In people of all races, all nationalities,
all genders, all sexual orientations,
all abilities, in Democrat and Republican,

in those who love us back

and those who hate us because we are one of those things they
don't like.

Christ is in all of us and will fill each of us with the love of God
if we don't stand in the way of the Spirit.

If I want to talk about inclusivity then I also need to mention
language because often, especially here at Phoenix, when we
talk about inclusivity, we talk about language.

So many have been, and still are, pushed away and excluded by
the language used by religious institutions. But even as we
identify what language can cause pain, we also struggle with
finding better words.

Do we refer to God as he or she? We can usually agree that
God is both... and neither – so we balance our gender based
language for God or avoid using gender based language at all.

But what about other language and theological concepts that
have been used to exclude?

The language of sin is a prime example that many in the
GLBTQ community are sensitive to. The language of sin is

often used to tell people they are inferior and underserving
when in reality they are loved children of God just as they are.
And so we often choose to reject traditional language about sin
and find other ways to talk about it.

Sin, for example, can be talked about as separation from God,
which enables us to point out that being gay, lesbian, bisexual,
transgender, or any other non-heterosexual status doesn't
separate us from God and is therefore not sinful. Indeed, trying
to be who you are not is what separates us from God and could
be called sinful.

But then we also have other language that can present a
problem. For some, talking about Jesus as our savior conjures
the unacceptable traditional messages of sinfulness. But savior
can also imply healer, or one who saves us from separation from
God's love.

For all who bristle at the term, savior can be just as meaningful
to others. So how do we use this traditional language? This is
where we don't always agree.

Do we throw the term out and find other language that doesn't
carry so much baggage for some? Or do we use the language
knowing some people find it a reminder of the damage church
can do if we're not careful?

Is inclusivity about working not to offend anyone and thus not
push anyone away? Even if some might find their experience
diminished?

Or is inclusivity about including that which might speak to only
some hearts so that everyone at least hears what is dear to them
at least some of the time? Even if some might find their
experience diminished?

You know what? I don't have the answer. It's a tricky tightrope.
It's a question we've been discussing for at least the thirteen

years I've been part of this church and I'm not convinced there is an answer where we can declare one approach better than the other.

But, we do need to realize that a message of inclusiveness does not mean we can be everything to everyone.

Inclusiveness is not about having to agree with each other.

It is not about preaching the right dogma

or obeying the right rules

or finding the perfect language to use.

Inclusiveness is about respecting our differences.

Inclusiveness is about loving each other

and recognizing the Christ in the other.

We shall be known as disciples of Jesus by our love for one another.

Who am I to stand in God's way?

The Spirit will abide in each of us – does abide in each of us – if we don't stand in the way with our rules and standards and dogmas.

Tonight we celebrate our covenant together. A covenant as understood in the United Church of Christ is also a statement of radical inclusiveness.

We agree to be in community together as part of the universal body of Christ despite differences.

We're not promising to always agree with each other.

We're not promising that there won't ever be problems.

But we are promising to love each other and to be in community together and with the wider church even as we also love all of our neighbors, all of God's wonderful creation.

God is at work in each of us. God is at work in this church.

Let us get out of God's way and follow God's leading.

Let us be God's love in the world. Amen.