

Creationist 2.0

Creating Includes

20 August 2023

Call to Worship – Psalm 133

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

It is like the precious oil on the head,

Running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron,

Running down over the collar of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.

For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

All creatures of our God and King

W H Draper

All creatures of our God and King,

Lift up your voice and with us sing

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Thou burning sun with golden beam,

Thou silver moon with softer gleam,

O praise him, O praise him,

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Thou rushing wind that art so strong,

Ye clouds that sail in heav'n along,

O praise him, alleluia!

Thou rising morn, in praise rejoice,

Ye lights of evening, find a voice,

O praise him, O praise him,

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Let all things their Creator bless,

And worship him in humbleness,

O praise him, alleluia!

Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,

And praise the Spirit, three in one,

O praise him, O praise him,

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

God of ice-cream and lollies, cake and dessert

God of fun and laughter, BBQs and dinner parties

God of contentment and joy, good friends and good conversation

You are the giver of good things

We appreciate and enjoy all the good things you give

Then, when things go wrong, you walk beside us

While we complain and moan

Wishing we could have all the good things and none of the bad

We know we do this

We know we are two faced in our relationship with you

Help us learn to bless you in the good and the bad

Help us to be consistent in our relationship with you

Help us to own who we are and to be content in your love

We bring our private confessions before God...

The God who sees our hearts and knows our minds

Loves us in spite of who we are, not because

We are forgiven not from duty or in recompense

But because Christ lived and died for us

Amen.

The Peace

Notices

Reading

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³² For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Reflection

I'm going to be honest here. I don't really get why Paul gets so complicated here. I think what he is trying to say is that God includes everyone, Jews and Gentiles. That he longs to extend his mercy to every part of his creation and to each person in his creation. I get the feeling that Paul is so busy trying to justify his reasoning that he forgets how simple it is. God loves you and is extending his mercy to you. Full stop, game over. The space in God's heart is big enough for you and for me and for absolutely everyone else.

Actually, I do have a suspicion about why Paul is working at this so hard. It's not because it is a difficult idea. It is because we, that is his listeners, make it more difficult than it needs to be. What I mean is this. We, you and I, like to set boundaries. We like to define who is in and who is out. The Synod of Otago and Southland includes everyone south of the Waitaki River and excludes everyone else. The Awamoa Bowling Club includes everyone who pays their fees and excludes everyone else. The church is no different. The first disciples were astonished and perplexed when Gentiles started coming to faith. The Catholic Church has gone to war with the Protestant Church on multiple occasions. Even today, depending on which bishop you come under in New Zealand, to get your child into a Catholic School you can be required to go through some quite ridiculous hoops. The mainline churches often show animosity toward the Pentecostal churches. It's all about who is in and who is out.

Meanwhile, God looks on and says, 'I love you all. You are all included in my grace and mercy because I am a generous God.' And here is our key word. In order to include we need to learn to be generous. We exclude people because we are stingy with what we have. No, you can't be a part of my exclusive club because we don't have enough to go around. What we don't have enough of is often unspoken. It might be energy to make new friends. It might be desire to connect with people we don't know. It might be room to sit another person in the lounge. In the end it is the result of a poverty mentality. I don't have enough and I cannot afford to share what I do have.

Strangely enough it is the poorest among us who are often the most generous. I met Rudolph when I was in Guyana. He, his wife and his 3 children lived in a small shack that was barely large enough to fit a double bed, a small lounge suite and have room for a tiny kitchen bench. I had to be careful where I stood because the floorboards could barely carry my weight. When the 3 of us arrived to visit the lady of the house left. About ten minutes later she returned

with a can of coke. The coke was carefully measured into 3 glasses and presented to us. The pastor later told me that she had spent a significant amount of their weekly grocery money to buy the coke. In my eyes they had nothing, but what they had they shared with genuine generosity. I will treasure that experience for the rest of my life. I have seen a similar attitude among the poorest here in New Zealand and. They are barely surviving, but if someone is in more need than they are then they will help any way they can.

These people are a case study in being generous. They don't count what they don't have, they look for how they can best use what they do have to bless others. A generous person sees a problem, takes responsibility for the problem and looks for solutions. They don't want to exclude others because they see the value in what the other has to offer.

I've not thought of it this way before but I have another story to share. I grew up in a Boys Brigade family. My dad was the captain of the local company and my mum helped out in a multitude of ways. When I joined the company section I worked hard to earn my stripes and become an NCO. Then I became a squad leader. By this time my dad had retired as captain, thinking it might be best if he wasn't around while I was there. After a couple of years of being a squad leader I began to realise that I constantly ended up with what I thought of as the dregs of the company. The boys who were too slow or weak or able to be competitive. It made me angry because the other squad leaders could win competitions without even trying because their guys were so much more on to it than mine. And so I worked very, very hard to build up my squad. I trained them, I drove them, I pushed them and dammit, we would start winning. Then it would begin all over again the next year. I remember going home frustrated and furious and sitting with Mum and Dad and complaining about how I always got the losers. Mum and Dad listened, and I will never forget what they said. 'Have you thought that maybe you get these guys because you are the only one who can help them win?' Without understanding what was going on I was being generous in the only way I knew how. To be fair there was a fair dollop of self-interest in there too – I wanted to win – but I was giving these guys the opportunity to shine in a way many of them had never experienced before. I was giving them everything in me so they could become more. I took them from being excluded to being included and in doing so they grew and so did I.

I want to offer you a challenge today. Consider how you can become more generous to include the excluded, to love the unloved, to strengthen the weak and serve the slow. Consider how you have received God's mercy and can now extend that same mercy to the Other.

These are the days of Elijah

Robin Mark

These are the days of Elijah,
Declaring the word of the Lord:
And these are the days of Your servant Moses,
Righteousness being restored.
And though these are days of great trial,
Of famine and darkness and sword,
Still, we are the voice in the desert crying
'Prepare ye the way of the Lord!'

Behold He comes, riding on the clouds
Shining like the sun, at the trumpet call!
Lift your voice, it's the year of jubilee
And out of Zion's hill salvation comes!

These are the days of Ezekiel,
The dry bones becoming as flesh.
And these are the days of Your servant David,
Rebuilding a temple of praise.
These are the days of the harvest,
The fields are as white in Your world!
And we are the laborers in Your vineyard,
Declaring the word of the Lord!

Reading Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus

answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Reflection

Jesus presents an interesting figure in this story. We meet him ignoring a woman in distress. She was so persistent in her attempts to get him to respond that his disciples came and complained to him about it. 'She keeps shouting after us.' All he had to say to the disciples was, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.' So here we see a racially motivated choice to disregard the needs of a person who is suffering deep anguish. On the one hand there are the included sheep of the house of Israel, on the other the excluded everyone else. It doesn't present a very complementary image.

Then it gets worse. She gets right up in his face, prevents him from moving on, and says, 'Lord, help me.' No longer able to simply ignore her he proceeds to insult her, saying, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' There is really no good take on this situation and should anyone display this kind of behaviour today they would be quite rightly held to account. It is, in almost every way the exact opposite of generous and inclusive. Which means it is no wonder that we rarely talk about this story without immediately leaping to the great faith of the woman. By doing that we can avoid this strange behaviour Jesus displays.

I want to pause for a few moments on Jesus' attitude and actions. Paul writes to Timothy telling him that all scripture is useful. At that point he wasn't talking about the Gospels because they had yet to be written. I think that we can retrospectively apply the same principle to this story. This story is given to us for a reason. I found it interesting that in my reading about this passage commentators struggle with Jesus' behaviour. I suspect this is, to some extent, because we don't want to deal with the implications of what he says and does. To be honest, it makes me deeply uncomfortable. No matter how you try to frame it, Jesus sounds like he is making racially motivated decisions. There is no generosity here. There is no including and loving the Other. It feels like a small-minded, meanness of spirit.

But wait, you might say, Jesus redeems himself when he does finally respond with the answer she is looking for. All of which is wonderful, but why did it take so long in the first place? Why did the woman have to justify her request by comparing herself with the dogs getting the scraps from the table? Surely the

Son of David has more than enough to go around! All of which prompts us to go deeper and to search for what God is trying to teach us here.

Let's look at the flow of the story. Jesus has left a confrontation with the Pharisees. He is in foreign territory – something which is telling considering his statement about who he has been sent to. He is hounded by a woman, foreign to him, but on her home territory. He ignores her, the culturally correct response. The disciples implore him to send her away, difficult to achieve given they are on her home ground. She confronts him. He insults her. She turns the insult into a statement of faith. He responds with respect and healing follows.

Here's a thought. What if Jesus is out of his comfort zone here? He has moved over the border to get away from confrontation and is immediately faced with a different kind of confrontation. His first response is both culturally conditioned – you are a foreign woman so I won't engage with you, and emotionally driven – I'm exhausted and need a break from people. Perhaps if I say nothing she might go away and leave me alone. I need some space and time to myself. Perhaps in this story we meet the fully human Jesus often hidden behind walls of spiritual overhype. It takes the desperate persistence of a distraught mother to break down the boundaries between them.

I confess that at this point I had a bit of a lightbulb moment. It might seem pretty obvious to you but it occurred to me that if Jesus struggled to deal with the pressure here, it's no surprise that I struggle, that we struggle with pressure. Some are better at it than others, but the simple truth is that generosity is hard. Including the Other is hard. When we are under pressure, no matter what that pressure might be, everything gets harder. And this is the second part of my lightbulb moment. I desperately need the people around me, you, to support me at being generous and including the Other. Don't get me wrong, I have always known this both at an experiential level and intellectually. But seeing Jesus caught between his exhaustion and his desire to be generous presses it home on a much deeper level. It is all well and good to talk about being generous and including the Other. But I can't do it on my own. None of us can do it on our own. We need God and we need each other.

This is the core principle we need to make our own if we are to be a community who live out pastoral care, for each other and for the Other, the foreigner, the stranger, the anguished and the distressed. Being creators who include is not and cannot be a solitary activity.

To extend my earlier challenge: How can we extend Christ's mercy to the Other as a generous community?

We Pray

You have called us God and gifted us with all we need to be your people in this world. You have shown your generosity to us by including us in your family. We are so grateful for all that you have given us, shown us, taught us. Help us to be like Jesus, fully human, but finding somewhere, deep down, the ability to extend love and mercy to those in need of what we can offer. Help us to find the courage to step out of our learned behaviours and prejudices to be generous far beyond what we could ever manage apart from you. Let us be known, not just for our love for ourselves – that is easy – but for our love for the Other, the unloved, the unlovely, so people begin to ask, 'What must I do to be saved?' Through Jesus who broke through his preferences to bless the Other we pray. Amen

Everything that has breath

Parachute Band

He is our God

Let all creation bow

The sovereign King most holy one

He sacrificed His life

Washed and cleansed within

Portioned by faith

We're destined to win

Everything that has breath praise the Lord

Everything that's in me praise the Lord

I can praise Him on the highest mountain

Praise Him in the lowest valley

Everything that's in me praise the Lord

Offering

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning>

Creator and architect of the universe, we want to believe that your love for us means you will go before us on life's path and clear the way, making it easy to travel, but our experience doesn't always bear that out. We know you see a bigger picture than we do. As we bring you our offerings this day, we affirm you are with us. Teach us to include the Other through our giving. We give with gratitude, in Christ's holy name. Amen.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Holy Friend, hear our prayers for the salvation of many.

Where there are Christians whose faith has been shaken by suffering and tragedies,

Let there be light,

let there be trust,

let there be hope,

let there be peace.

Where there are cynics whose protective coating has been cracked by genuine love,

Where there are seekers who have come close to belief but hesitate on the brink,

Where there are the dying and the bereaved who face the darkness without hope,

Where there are political leaders who admit their fallibility and now look for guidance,

Where there are church leaders caught up in a web of details but forgetting their first love,

Where there are welfare agencies and overseas aid groups who have become self-serving,

Where there are members of this congregation who carry deep hurts, fears, guilt or anger,

God our Holy Friend, help us to do for one another all those deeds of love which are within our capacity, and where the issues are beyond us, fill up our emptiness with your eternal wisdom and strength. Through Christ Jesus our Saviour. Amen!

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, holy be your name

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

How Great Thou Art

Carl Boberg

Oh Lord, my God

When I, in awesome wonder

Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made

I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder

Thy power throughout the universe displayed

Whakaaria mai tou ripeka ki au

Tiaho mai ra roto i te po

Hei kona au titiro atu ai

Ora, mate hei au koi noho ai ai ai

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee

How great Thou art, how great Thou art

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to Thee

How great Thou art, how great Thou art

And when I think that God, His Son not sparing

Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in

That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing

He bled and died to take away my sin

When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation

And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart

Then I shall bow, in humble adoration

And then proclaim, my God, how great Thou art

Benediction and Grace

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

the Love of God,

and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit

be with us all, now and forevermore. Amen.

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