



United Methodist Church OF GENEVA

What We Value: Inclusion

A first sermon in the series on UMCG Values by Pastor Rob Hamilton.

Delivered on January 8, 2023 on Mark 2:15–17 NRSVUE

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. **16** When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" **17** When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Value: Inclusion: At UMCG, we boldly love and accept people for who they are.

Preamble

As we start the new year, we are going to ground ourselves in the Gospel for the work of our Moving Forward Initiative that we began last year. It was about this time last year that Ministry Architects did a church-wide assessment - a diagnostic of the challenges facing our church. That report led to an initiative to start making changes that have stopped the decline of our church and has even started to show elements of new life and growth.

This past fall, we invited the whole church to a Moving Forward Summit where we set out to collectively name our mission, values and goals for the coming year. Because we took a grass-roots approach, where we get input from the congregation in developing the direction of the congregation, instead of leadership hashing it out and selling it to the church, it has taken us a few months to get it all ready to go. The result is that this year, we feel called as a church to: **(We) illuminate our community with God's grace as we lovingly accept, listen to, and serve all in the Spirit of Jesus.** This is our mission statement and the pastor's blog will expand on this with guest bloggers throughout the beginning of the year. What I want to do in worship is to ground us in the gospel-roots in the values that make both this mission come alive and our goals a reality in 2023.

One last quick word on how we came up with the goals. We did this with a group of 60 people on a Friday night in September. The group came up with a list of 49 values - everyone had a say, but then we had to all vote on which values were most important. Six rose to the top, that means some didn't even use their votes for their own suggested values. We then spent several meetings defining the top



United Methodist Church

OF GENEVA

ranked values. The top-voted value was inclusion and we then said of inclusion that at UMCg: We boldly love and accept people for who they are.

Inclusion might sound like a great idea, but as a church, we need to know how we are called to be inclusive: boldly loving and accepting people for who they are and how all our values rooted in the Gospel, so that our values are reflected in the Spirit of Jesus. So, let's pause for prayer as we dive deep into the gospel and inclusion. Let's pray:

Prayer of Illumination

Jesus,

Thank you for your Spirit that is set loose upon all flesh. I thank you for your Spirit that moves in this church through the Moving Forward Initiative calling us to find a new identity and calling in you. Keep your Spirit moving in us now, in my words, in their hearing and in their doing - that we might follow your Spirit's leading faithfully as your people called United Methodist of Geneva. Amen.

Sermon

I've spent much of my life reading the stories of Jesus. Studying them, internalizing them, struggling with them, having my life changed by them, telling them to our children, sharing them with the world. One of the biggest challenges I receive from Jesus is how he treated people. Nearly, consistently throughout the gospels, Jesus is gentle on people and tough on issues. Here is what I mean by that, when we see Jesus' interaction with people - whether it is his closest pals the disciples or strangers on the street - **Jesus sees people as humans first - people created in the image of God and worthy of dignity, respect, and love.** That is almost always first and foremost for Jesus. That doesn't mean that Jesus doesn't care about the moral and spiritual condition of a person, it is just that Jesus' concern for the one's moral or spiritual condition is grounded in love of person and not in being right or wrong or demonstration of moral superiority and certainly not trying to keep undesirables out of the in group.

Practically, Jesus doesn't see the self-righteous Pharisee as some pitifully misguided soul. Jesus sees a brother who is struggling with insecurity and envy. Jesus doesn't see a shameful, adulterous woman. Jesus sees a sister who has struggled with healthy relationships. No one gets a free pass with Jesus. Jesus connects with the human first and sorts out the rest later.

Let's walk through some of the gospel stories to see how Jesus does this, starting with the reading from today.



United Methodist Church OF GENEVA

Jesus decides to have dinner at Levi's house, where there are sinners and tax collectors. Notice that Mark makes sure the labels for the people are named, not the people themselves. Mark doesn't say Levi had Bob, Nancy, Nick and Delores and their partners over for dinner with Jesus. No Mark uses labels that signify that sinners and tax collectors are looked down upon and commonly dehumanized. Mark does the same with the critics in the story - the Pharisees and scribes - they don't get named either, just labeled as religious in-group who regular folks dehumanize for being so self-righteous.



To the critics, Jesus replies "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners." - which could mean that everyone is a sinner and is worthy of God's love. Jesus doesn't comment on the behavior or moral standing of his fellow dinner guests - instead Jesus reminds his critics that they are loved too.

In Luke's gospel chapter 7 starting in verse 36, this time Jesus is eating at the Pharisee's house. Jesus is with the in-group and a woman again only identified as a sinner, not by name, comes and anoints him. This creates a stir at the table and Jesus tells a story about debts being forgiven and he forgives the woman's sins and makes sure he lifts up her humanity as he forgives her sin and calls his dinner guests to see her the same.



Matthew chapter 8, Jesus comes upon a leper, a person with a skin disease who is often shunned and avoided for fear of catching the disease yourself. Jesus doesn't see a walking bag of disease to be avoided, he sees a suffering child of God who needs a healing touch -



United Methodist Church OF GENEVA



and Jesus touches him. The next section in that chapter a Centurion - that is a soldier of the occupying forces comes to Jesus for help for his paralyzed and suffering servant - this would be like a Russian asking a Ukrainian for help in Ukraine. Jesus doesn't grizzle his teeth at this political enemy, no what does Jesus do, but heals the Centurion's servant.

This goes on and on. Jesus loves first and sorts out the rest second. Except the one time Jesus didn't - Jesus was more like us. Both Mark and Matthew record this story. Mark in chapter 7 and Matthew in chapter 15. I'll read this from Matthew, *"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."*



Here, unlike other places in the gospel, Jesus saw the label first. He saw this woman as a Gentile, a group of people often looked down upon by most Jewish people at the time. Jesus denied her humanity and the need of this mother and her sick daughter. Here Jesus didn't love first and the



United Methodist Church OF GENEVA

Syrophenician woman called him out on it and Jesus corrected course. Jesus saw her humanity and met her need.

To me, all of these instances are of Jesus being inclusive. One such definition of **inclusion is: *the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized***¹. Jesus doesn't love, accept or care for people based on their status or behavior, he just loves people and works on improving their spiritual and moral condition next as an outflow of love. So, at UMCG: when we say "we boldly love and accept people for who they are." That's a statement that we seek love of people because they exist as fellow human beings who bear the divine image - it's not a statement about embracing behaviors or practices, mistakes, or identities. Our call is to love people, like Jesus loves people, which is really hard to do, because some of us are hard to love.

One of the places where including people and loving like Jesus that might be as hard as it is in a church is in middle school, but these boys might have figured it out: Let's watch: [\(Click here to watch video\).](#)

There are so many places where exclusion happens, including the church - and even to some degree in our church. Therefore, we state inclusion as a value and look to Jesus for help being inclusive. To boldly love and accept people for who they are is one of the marks of Christians. Because if the people who bear Jesus' name can't love people first like Jesus, then maybe we aren't Christians.

We will not always live fully into our ideal because being inclusive is hard. It was hard for Jesus, he even failed to live into his ideal once and when called out on it made it right. We should expect no less in our church, when we get it wrong, to be called out and then work hard to make it right. Because Jesus loves everyone as a person first and that act of love changes lives and the world.

Jesus loves you, me; loves all. By the Spirit of Jesus let us make it known to the whole world that Jesus loves everyone not just because the Bible tells us so, but because the people of United Methodist Church of Geneva boldly love and accept people for who they are. Amen.

¹<https://www.google.com/search?q=define+inclusion&oq=define+inclusion&aqs=chrome..69i57j0i512l9.2164j1j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>