

Becoming Citizens of the Kingdom of God

All Saints Church, Pasadena, 10:00 a.m., March 3, 2024

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I grew up in Warsaw, a small town in north central Indiana, and if you know anything about Indiana, you know that Hoosiers are wild about basketball. People will drive to a basketball game in weather that they might not venture out in even to attend a relative's wedding or funeral. Admittedly, their devotion is not unlike some Dodger fans I love here at All Saints! In my senior year in high school, our girls' basketball team made it to the state finals, and played in the state capital of Indianapolis. The town went nuts! Almost 2/3s of the town's population purchased tickets-- thousands of tickets. As the day of the tournament neared, a sign appeared on the road leading to Indianapolis. It said, "Last person out of Warsaw, please turn out the lights."

This happy occasion of pride in "our team" was a benign group identity, for the most part, and because it was the first ever girl's state tournament, it was a celebration of young women in sports. And by the way, the Warsaw tigers won!

The need to belong and identify with other people is intrinsic to us as human beings. We come into the world as newborns, already wired for connection. Even before our first breath we are a part of something beyond ourselves. As we grow, our sense of belonging and identity grow with us, becoming broader and ever more inclusive of other groupings of people. Optimally we become more inclusive and less binary, until we see ourselves as members of the largest of all circles, in which everyone and everything belong. This is to be a beloved child of God's all-inclusive family, where there are no outsiders and where the margins disappear. This is our true identity and destination, and it is a life-long developmental process.

I didn't grow up in a faith tradition that really saw Jesus as a human being who needed to develop, who needed to expand his identity and cultural circle. Today's lectionary readings point to just that fact as they describe a scene in the life of Jesus. The story is one of an all too human cranky Jesus who needed to grow into the person God was calling him to be, just like all of us. Jesus needed the woman in the story to help him. The occasion was a tired Jesus looking for some peace and quiet, by ducking into a house hoping not to be noticed. But noticed he was, by a desperate mother seeking healing for her daughter. I'm certain he needed a rest, and she interrupted his plan.

This unnamed Syrophoenician woman was a descendent of bitter enemies of Israel--enemies whom Israel had conquered and displaced from their land. Jesus is definitely the non-target person in this interaction, and although he identifies as God's beloved, there are aspects of his story that are rooted in a group identity that differentiated itself by emphasizing differences rather than commonalities with others. He initially rejects the woman's request to heal her daughter, and uses a highly derogatory metaphor, "dogs versus children", thereby demeaning her and her people.

Yet she persists. Notice that she calls him Healer, not Lord, drawing Jesus into the heart of his calling to birth the kingdom of God. She also insists that she is worthy of inclusion in God's healing circle. In her love fueled courage, she challenges Jesus' identity, enlarges Jesus' story about God and neighbor, and breaks through Jesus' cultural isolation. She is not the first woman in Jesus' life to call him forward into his future. Recall the wedding at Cana, when it was his mother who recognized the time had come for Jesus' miraculous ministry to begin.

The passage reminds us that Jesus didn't come into the world already formed and "perfect". He went through the terrible twos. He gave his parents near heart failure as a pre-teen. He was a real human being, spiritually and humanly developmental, just like us. The good news for Jesus in his lifetime, and for us in ours, is that we have each other to help us grow into our belovedness and our true calling as guardians of God's Spirit within us and all around us. And we have God, the All-seeing, all-compassionate Mother of All, who loves to grow us up into being Her friends and collaborators. Our need to do something for someone beyond ourselves to help them grow and thrive, and God's desire is a match made in heaven.

But then, why is it challenging for us to expand our identity and enlarge our stories about ourselves, God and each other? Clearly, we see evidence of in ourselves, our community, our nation and our world.

Some thoughts.

First, it's not because we are intrinsically bad; it's just who we are. Our identity is supported by our stories about ourselves and what makes us feel safe or have a sense of belonging or importance. Every person has some aspects of their identity that are vulnerable to disruption in the face of someone else's culture or story. Furthermore, some aspects of cultural isolation are natural to us and comforting. *Without intentionality*, we unconsciously befriend people who seem familiar. We naturally like people who seem familiar to us, and tend to perceive people who are completely unfamiliar as less likable. Our homogeneity can become a cage that entraps our group, preventing us from becoming familiar and proximate with culturally different others. God's antidote to our homogeneity is the practice of radical hospitality.

You see, we are what cognitive psychologists, like Christena Cleveland, call "cognitive misers". As human beings, we conserve our cognitive energy by developing mental shortcuts to deal with the volume of information that comes at us every day. This volume far exceeds our ability to process it, so we categorize. Putting things into categories makes it easier to navigate the world and we feel safer. This leads us to fixed binary distinctions like, male-female; good-bad; strong-weak.

Categorizing unfortunately also creates in groups and out groups. In fact, we often differentiate ourselves from other groups, even when there's no logical reason to do so, just like Jesus did with the Syrophenician woman. Fixating on differences, we may ignore glaring commonalities. Our research shows that division between groups tends to result in prejudice and prejudice tends to result in division between groups, in a vicious cycle. What begins as seemingly

harmless homogeneity can snowball into distrust, inaccurate perceptions of other groups, prejudice, and outright hostility.

Growth in my life has meant recognizing my privilege, noticing what I don't have to endure. Like being followed in Macy's because I might be stealing, as our beloved Zelda was. Like not being afraid that if I call the police, they are going to harm me. The high school that I attended in rural Indiana? had one Black student and one Jewish student. It took a friend of mine here at All Saints to prompt me to wonder and investigate why there was such homogeneity in my home town. Until I was in college, with the courageous disclosure by a close friend, it didn't even occur to me that there might have been a splendidly non-binary person in my high school. I am not bad but I certainly am a human being who needs my community and the presence of God's Spirit to continue to grow into my truest and most conscious self.

All Saints, we are being called to develop a new level of heterogeneity and multicultural belonging. We, within these beautiful walls, must represent the kingdom of God that the world is desperate for. It is critically important for us at this time and place in our nation and world.

Owasso High School in Oklahoma, February 7, *two-spirited*, 16-year-old Nex Benedict's life ended after being bullied for being in a space that the laws of the state said Nex didn't belong. Law makers have encouraged a culture of hate and violence in which youth like Nex can be attacked.

We cannot let this continue. We have to do better for our children, not only our trans kids and non-binary children, but all the children here at All Saints Church, and beyond.

Last week, I went to our CYF staff and our staff supporting LGBTQ beloved adults children of God, and asked how those they shepherd were doing. Thomas Diaz and the LGBTQ support group offered their discovery that Nex and Nex's mother, are members of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, and they identified as "Two-Spirited." This Indigenous term, used in different contexts and tribes, reflects a masculine and feminine spirit in one body. No binary; no exclusion; instead an appreciation of beauty and diversity.

Our youth are frightened and revolted. They understand that if Nex is not safe, or the bodies of black, indigenous, and youth of color, or the bodies of trans or female youth, then no child's body is safe.

They have clarity: by our actions, we need to give them hope.

Rather than have me speak for them, Cress Diehl, one of our own, would like to read a poem:

*If God created the
Night & the day
& the dawn, of course
& the dusk
& the tangerine
Rose pink sunset
& the infant bright of*

*Morning
& the Deep
Amethyst twilight.
Then, to perceive
The world in
Binary is to
Forego
Knowledge of the
Divine*

Thank you. Dear God, can we learn from our children?

In this pre-election year, in which our democracy and the rule of law is increasingly threatened, as the notion of a common good is buried in Christian nationalism, as regressive binaries and laws are used to fuel hatred and violence, we must speak out and act. God is calling us to protect our LGBTQ siblings in every space in America. We must protect women's bodies in Alabama, and beloved black bodies everywhere. We must defend voting rights for all. In the name of Nex, God is calling us to action, now. God is calling us to be and to proclaim the good news that the world is desperate to hear! You've got heart All Saints! You've got soul. May we listen, learn, grow, and be what the world needs us to be.

Amen.