



WHAT ARE WE AFRAID OF?

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Brookside Community Church
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Mark 4:35-41

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Truly inclusive religious spaces are those that say, "We long for you to be included among us because we cannot fully encounter the mystery of God without you."

Faith vs. the Law

*“From the Bureau of Justice directives have come
to send out the G-men, round up everyone
who puts human beings ahead of the state,
or preaching that love is better than hate.
So I’m going to prison so I can be free.
I’m going to prison for what I believe.”
—Barbara Dane, “Resistance Hymn”¹*

I’ve had this song with Barbara Dane’s voice in my head all week. I heard an interview earlier this week with this famed protest singer. I’ll talk more about Barbara Dane later. But the point of going to prison for the sake of freedom is quite relevant for the beginning of our time together today.

The last few weeks have really done a number on my soul. I tend to have a crisis of faith when political leaders begin using religious texts out of their contexts. I struggle with the question: Whose responsibility is it to tell the world that the Bible doesn’t really say what they think it says? Even when their interpretations are even relatively close to valid, I still want to scream, “But you can’t use the Bible that way!!” So, what am I to do? I hope you will forgive me if I just pause and reflect with you a little this morning, before we begin our important discussion about inclusion.

It was said this week that according to Romans 13 one should “Obey the laws of the government, because God has ordained the government for his purposes.” I don’t want to get into a long and drawn-out exegesis of what this verse means with you today. That would miss the important work we have already set aside to do today. Still, I feel obligated to say something. So let me begin with a couple of points. First, as we will see throughout our study on inclusivity, scripture verses are often used to support injustice. Hardly ever does anyone pay attention to the important questions about the context of the text where the verses are drawn. So hear me now when I say this, BEWARE OF THE PRACTICE OF PROOF-TEXTING, the use of scripture to justify someone’s opinion that is based on a single verse taken out of context without any real reference to the overall theological trajectory of its immediate biblical context or the socio-historical context in which it was written.

Let me just say another few words specifically about Romans 13. First off, “the law”—meaning the legal framework of an administrative territory—and the Bible have a very complicated, and at times quite tense, relationship. Moses, remember, led an entire population to disobey the government and escape slavery to freedom. Most of the prophets of Israel were openly critical of the laws and rulers of their day. The story in the book of Daniel begins with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were thrown into a furnace to be burned alive because they disobeyed the law of King Nebuchadnezzar. Most of us probably remember from our childhood Sunday school days that Daniel was thrown in a den of lions for disobeying the law of the Medes and Persians. Of course, since it’s not told in our Protestant Bibles, we can skip over the story of the politically rebellious Maccabees

¹ Barbara Dane, “Resistance Hymn.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS1rSEngxNE>

who disobeyed the law, ignited a revolution, and won their land back. (You can go and ask your well-read Roman Catholic friends for the scoop on that one.)

Well then, perhaps you think the relationship might be different between the “law” and the New Testament? Think again! Remember, the Gospel of Matthew begins with the story of a refugee family trying to keep their baby safe, alive, and out of the hands of abusive government leaders. Then there are those “Wise Men” who refused to obey the orders of the area’s chief executive. Then we get the story of a homeless subversive, John the Baptist, who speaks against the political authorities until he is imprisoned and then publicly executed. When we finally get to Jesus, the star of the whole story, what we find is someone who hangs out with criminals and then is arrested, tried, punished, and executed. When we move past the gospels, the story in the Book of Acts tells us that the Church’s first leaders had trouble with the law too. Let us not forget that many of the Epistles were written from prison. In the letter to the Romans, the epistle so often quoted to justify unjust governmental policy, Paul says that he has hopes that he will one day visit their congregation and their city. When he finally arrives in Rome, three years later, he arrived as a convicted criminal. I could go on and on and talk about what the tradition says about how the first followers of Jesus were all martyred and so on... but you get the point.

What is more troubling to me is the way Romans 13 has been used, even in recent history, to try to keep political subversives in their place. It was used by the crown loyalists during the American Revolution to promote obedience to the king. It was used in the 1850s to justify the Fugitive Slave Act. But, of course, none of these examples are based on a reading of the whole letter, or even the whole chapter. If we read the whole chapter, perhaps we would stop and notice the power of the the language of Romans 13:10, which says, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

I’ve been thinking about this all week. So you can see why I’ve got that Barbara Dane song on my mind. Seems like she was in good company—folks like Moses, Daniel, John the Baptist, Jesus, the Apostle Paul, Gandhi, or Dr. King—when she sang, “I’m going to prison so that I can be free.”

Barbara Dane’s Story

Our passage today echoes what we heard a few weeks ago when my friend Rev. Rodney Lynch preached. We have the challenge to “go to the other side!” We know that the journey to the other side is going to be stormy, but as followers of Jesus, we have to go. And so Jesus sees us in the midst of the storm and asks us, “Why are you afraid?”

That is my question for us this morning. What are we afraid of?

For the next few weeks we will be talking about a specific issue: homosexuality and the Bible. We will be asking ourselves, “How do we become a more faithful, more inclusive community?” Like Rev. Lynch challenged us, and our reading from the gospel of Mark challenges us today, how do we get to the other side? It will not be without storms. It may be terrifying. But our faith tells us that Jesus will

be with us. So I want to help us think through this question this morning by learning from Barbara Dane.

Now, if you don't know her, Barbara Dane, along with Pete Seeger, was famous for teaching America to sing protest songs. I was listening to a recent interview this week where she described her story of waking up to the injustice around her. I think her story might be helpful for us, today, as we begin on our journey to become a more inclusive congregation.

Her father grew up in Klan country, Arkansas. After becoming a pharmacist, he moved north and ran a small pharmacy in Detroit during the depression. As Barbara Dane remembers, there was a group of African American workers outside with picks and shovels one terribly hot day. One of them came in and asked for a "coke cola." She directed the man to sit down so he could cool off. Before long, her father came out and shouted for the man to leave. "Get out of here! Don't you know you can't drink that in here." When the man left, her father said to her, "You know you can't do that. You can't have them in here...We'll lose all our customers."²

I've been thinking about how to understand what it means to be inclusive, and I think this story of Barbara Dane's awakening illustrates well the problem of domination and exclusion. There is no getting around the fact that we are a privileged, white community. That is our own social location. So we might ask ourselves, "Was her father racist?" Better yet, we might ask ourselves whether we think her father would identify himself as racist? Either way, what matters most is that the act of exclusion itself *was* racist. Barbara noticed it and it marked her life for good. She said, "Somehow in that moment, I knew it wasn't fair...I knew the man was right and my dad was wrong. And that led me to question that kind of interchange for the rest of my life.

If we look a bit deeper at the situation, what we see is that the young and naive daughter simply saw a hot human being who wanted to cool off. Her father's justification was not that he had a particular personal opinion about the man, but that serving him might cost him his other customers. It was the depression, remember. We should ask ourselves what we would do if we were that father in that situation. Let's assume for the benefit of the doubt that this man was morally conflicted. Let's use our imagination and pretend the story ended differently than we know it did. After the man walks out the front, perhaps Barbara Dane's father found him and pulled him behind the building and gave him a case of cold "coke colas" to share with his worker friends. How would that change how we talk about racism and exclusion in this situation? Would the father be acting somehow less exclusive had he done this?

Let me break down for you what I see in this situation by putting exclusion and inclusion on a spectrum. I'm going to outline five points on the spectrum and use it to help us think about this story. Far to one side are the ***Hard Exclusive Communities***. This is where you see active white

² Barbara Dane in an interview with Jeremy Scahill, Jack D'Isidoro (Producer). (2018, June 20). *Administration Of Hate: The Snatching And Caging Of Immigrant Children. It Is Happening Here*. [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <https://theintercept.com/2018/06/20/administration-of-hate-the-snatching-and-caging-of-immigrant-children-it-is-happening-here/>

supremacism, hate groups, religious intolerance, misogyny, and all forms of outright, active exclusion. Then there are the ***Soft Exclusive Communities***. These are those who are uncomfortable affirming or interacting with oppressed people who are different than them. They are operating from a place of social privilege with an active fear of the “the other”: xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, etc. Next, there are those communities that are ***Exclusive by Association***. These are the communities who are uncomfortable being inclusive out of fear of being excluded by the dominant community. (Barbara Dane’s father—after we’ve given him some help with our imagination—is operating out of this fear of what will happen to his reputation and his customer base if he begins to act differently.) It may sound harsh to say it this way, but these folks care more about losing customers than about their brothers and sisters dying from a heat-stroke. They care more about getting a little water in their boats than their neighbors who are out in the sea drowning.

This is the point in the story, I think, when Jesus begins to speak to the storm and say, “Peace be still!” Sure, the world will exclude us like it does them. Sure, there will be storms. The water will begin coming into our boat and we might even fear for our lives. We might shout at Jesus, “Where are you? Don’t you care about us?” But then, we will hear Jesus look at us and says, “Why are you afraid?”

When we move along the spectrum toward a more inclusive community, we become, what I call ***Inclusive Participants***. (Some might want to call this ***Soft Inclusion***.) Inclusive Participants are those communities that want to be inclusive, know in their hearts that they are called to be inclusive, but yet they still continue to operate within an exclusivist framework. They say they are inclusive, but they do not actively participate in changing the situation. They want to continue to benefit from being at a place of privilege inside an exclusivist environment.

Finally, we arrive at the other side, our goal. On the other side, we find those excluded communities and begin to walk alongside them. This place on the spectrum represents those who are working to build ***Fully Inclusive, Beloved Communities***. Fully inclusive communities are places where difference is not just allowed but is fully affirmed, celebrated, and even sought after. Here, inclusion is coupled with an expectation of learning new ways to think, new languages, new practices, and other ways to overcome our oppressive, exclusive tendencies. In order to understand what this “other side” looks like, we actually have to go there. We cannot get to the other side by staying where we are. It must be clear to us that now, if we are to be fully inclusive, we have to begin to work alongside, even allow ourselves to be identified with those excluded by the dominate society.

If you read the stories of the gospel, this is where you find Jesus. Jesus begins and ends his ministry by associating himself with those who the larger society excluded. When it comes to any form of exclusion, its important that we understand that oppressed and excluded communities operate with their own forms of exclusion. This kind of exclusion, however, happens for the sake of protecting themselves from the wider oppressive, unsafe environment. These communities represent what is on the other side of the exclusive framework. This is what we are operating to overcome. In order to become a safe space, an inclusive space, we must be willing to learn from *excluded communities* how to create spaces that make them feel safe and included.

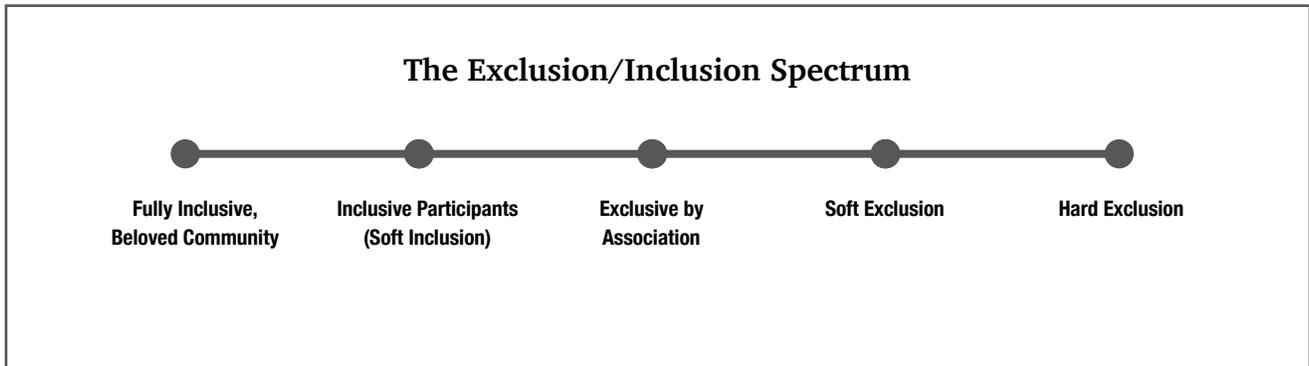
Where are we as a community? Where are we as individuals?

I want to close just by pointing out that while my example today has largely been about race, I think exclusion operates much the same way when it comes to gender and sexuality. For the rest of the summer we will be wrestling together with what the Bible says about homosexuality. (For the sake of full disclosure, I actually will be making the point that the Bible doesn't say anything about homosexuality.)

I wan't close by talking to you a bit about what it means to be an "Open and Affirming" congregation. Open means that we are willing to let anyone join us, sit alongside us, worship with us, and even participate. Most of the time, that is not really a point of conflict anymore. This would even describe some of the most conservative churches in our area. It is the affirming part that causes the most trouble. An affirming congregation is one that celebrates difference. Affirming, fully inclusive religious spaces are those that say, "We long for you to be included among us because we cannot fully encounter the mystery of God without you." They are the spaces where all people, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, women, men, transgender, genderqueer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, straight, Muslim, Jew, Hindu...all are welcome. But affirming means that they are not just welcomed, they are celebrated for being who they are!

Let's get there. I want to be alongside you as we journey to get there. Perhaps we need to hear the voice of Jesus say, "Peace be still! Why are we afraid of?"

Reflection Worksheet



Definitions

- **Hard Exclusion:** All forms of outright, active exclusion and hate groups, including white supremacy, religious intolerance, misogyny, etc.
- **Soft Exclusion:** Those who are uncomfortable affirming or interacting with people who are excluded from the dominant society. They are operating from a place of social privilege with an active fear of the “the other”: xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, etc.
- **Exclusive by Association:** Those who are uncomfortable being inclusive out of fear of being excluded by the dominant community.
- **Inclusive Participants (Soft Inclusion):** Those who want to be inclusive, but still continue to operate within an exclusivist framework. They may claim to be inclusive, but they do not actively participate in changing the situation because they want to continue to benefit from being at a place of privilege inside an exclusivist environment.
- **Fully Inclusive, Beloved Community:** Those who not only welcome difference but fully affirm it, celebrate it, and even seek after it. Here, inclusion is coupled with an expectation of learning new ways of thinking, new languages, new practices, and other ways to overcome our oppressive, exclusive tendencies.

Questions for Conversation and Reflection

- 1) In the story about Barbara Dane's experience, which character do you most easily identify with (the African American worker, the pharmacist, or the child)?
- 2) Do you find it easy or difficult to identify with the excluded person in Barbara Dane's story?
- 3) Where on the Exclusion Spectrum do you see yourself? Where do you see your congregation?
- 4) Take some time to reflect on the things that make inclusion scary?