

An Inclusive Christianity
Stephen Van Kuiken
Rincon Congregational Church
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*We confess that we have stepped away from Christ's Path whenever we have failed to practice love of God, neighbor, and self or have claimed Christianity is the only way, even as we claim it to be our way. —“Affirmation One,” *The Phoenix Affirmations*, Eric Elnes*

*2. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us. —*The Eight Points of Progressive Christianity*, The Center for Progressive Christianity*

Reading: John 14:1-7

We begin a series of sermons on “What is Progressive Christianity?” I do this because in our mission statement we call ourselves a “progressive Christian community,” but what does this mean? Do we have a common understanding? So I invite you to join in the conversation. We invite you to join us discuss the topics for the next six Sundays by coming to a discussion on the following Wednesday evening or on the following Sunday morning. We'll use sermon text as a discussion starter, but I expect a lot of variety.

Perhaps I should begin by saying, “The views expressed from this pulpit do not necessarily reflect the views of some of those in the pews.” But that's O.K. We don't all have to agree. In fact, perhaps one mark of a progressive church is there isn't a party-line to which one must subscribe.

I always have to laugh when I hear the Smothers Brothers do their routine. They would get into these arguments, and as they would carry on, Tommy would finally say, “Oh, yeah? Well, Mom always liked you best!”

Unfortunately, it is sometimes true, that parents have favorites. Sometimes parents need a scapegoat—someone on whom all the problems of the family may be projected—someone to blame and put down. Sometimes out of their own insecurity a parent might give more attention to the brightest, strongest, or prettiest child.

And it is sad when this happens because everyone lives a lie. One child learns to feel inadequate, that he or she will never amount to much. This child learns how to fail, a burden which pulls and weighs it down. The other child might learn success, but is destroyed in other ways by the lie that he or she is better than the sibling. This child learns to have a false inflated sense of self, and in its worst case replaces compassion with arrogance and egotism. The lie perpetuates and fulfills itself, burrowing its way into the hearts and souls of the siblings. Parents aren't perfect.

Yet most parents do not play favorites and would find it unthinkable. Most understand that love is not a limited resource, which needs to be carefully and equally distributed. Love knows no such bounds. A child of ten is not loved less than a child of three. It doesn't work that way.

To most people, Tommy's line, "Mom always liked you best," is laughable because it doesn't work that way. That line is only Tommy's futile, last-ditch attempt to win the argument, and argument he always loses.

And if this is true for human parental love, how much more true is it that all God's children are loved the same by God? Each person is infinitely and boundlessly precious in God's heart.

Yet God's children have not always seen it that way: "Surely the Almighty is on our side. We're special. There is no way that God can love those unclean barbarians the way God loves us!"

Jonah was so appalled at the thought that God was "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love," that he wanted to die! He was enraged at the thought that God's love extended not only to the nation, Israel, but also to the Ninevites. Jonah, a symbol of Israel itself, couldn't stand it.

It has been difficult for God's children, at times, to understand that God's love is *universal*. Jesus' disciples "marveled" that he talked with a woman of Samaria. And all of the respectable religious leaders who had any sense criticized Jesus for associating—even eating—with tax collectors and sinners. "Surely Jesus got it wrong. God loves us best!"

Likewise many today are appalled and enraged when God's steadfast love is extended to women as well as men, when one asserts that women as well as men are included in the language of Scripture, that God even loves those other denominations, other nations, other colors, even other religions than ours.

Yet the story has always been that God is always more inclusive and more loving than God's children think. Carl Sandburg was once asked, "What is the ugliest word in the English language?" After much thought he said, "Exclusive."

The message of Jesus was that Life is a gift from above and within, and it is not attained by achievement. He said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." God's children have often said, "God can't be *that* loving, *that* accepting. I don't care what Jesus said—I'm going to earn it anyway. Just in case. God can't really love me that much. And God can't possibly love *them* that much." Paul repeated the message: "None is righteous, no, not one. Since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, they are justified by grace as a gift" (Romans 3).

When we understand that the community is not full of good, obedient people, but rather it is full of imperfect and broken people loved by God, then we see just how universal God's love is. When we see that the point of entry is not achievement, that it is God's love that binds us, then we can say with Paul, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female (neither gay nor straight); for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote that "God, in Christ, was reconciling the world—the *entire cosmos*—to God's self."

God offers love, acceptance and life to everyone. Jesus declares that God loves and gives life to the entire cosmos.

And yet, the followers of Jesus have often turned the words of Jesus upside down. Instead of proclaiming with Jesus the message of God's inclusive love, the church often proclaimed exclusion, from the very beginning.

As you know, Jesus himself never wrote anything down. What we have are things that other people said that he said, written long after he died. Scholars today can say, with different degrees of confidence, which things Jesus actually said and which things were actually statements of other people that Jesus was portrayed as saying. Now, just because we say that a statement was made up doesn't always mean that it was wrong. Many of the made up statements were entirely in line with what the real Jesus would have said. However, sometimes the made up statement deviated from Jesus—like the one I chose today. "No one comes to the Father except through me," reflects the concern of an emerging church to legitimize itself. I don't believe that Jesus would have said it like this; it is not consistent with the words we can more positively attribute to the historical Jesus.

We must remember that these words were written for a persecuted religious community that was struggling for survival in the first two centuries C.E. And later in the 4th century the institutional church would use these words to consolidate exclusive power and control as the church and state merged under Constantine, claiming to be the only gateway to God. Jesus, it seems to me, no doubt embodied "the way, the truth and the life." However, he would never claim, I believe, to be the *only* embodiment of this way.

So these words of John mark the beginning of an exclusive Christianity. To borrow a phrase from Robert Funk, these words mark a time when the early communities began turning the religion *of* Jesus into a religion *about* Jesus. Jesus certainly did not want to become an object of worship, and most certainly he did not want to become a means of dividing people between the worthy and the unworthy. "No one comes to the Father except through me" has been used throughout the centuries to perpetuate religious imperialism and bigotry.

Rather, the more historically accurate words of Jesus, such as, "whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40) stand in a dramatic tension with these words from John. Notice

that he did not say, “whoever is *not for* us is against us” as some others have. Rather, it is a circle of inclusion, “whoever is not against us is for us.” It assumes a peaceful coexistence, a respect and an acceptance of others with different beliefs and views.

You know, so many people have rejected Christianity because all they have known is a Christianity that claims it is the only way. So I’m extremely grateful for groups and churches who share a different understanding of Jesus. (See the opening quotes from *The Phoenix Affirmations* and *The Eight Points of Progressive Christianity*.) Unfortunately, this still seems to be one of those best kept secrets.

A few years ago, Marcus Borg, a New Testament scholar, was asked in an interview why conservative churches were growing. He remarked that these churches weren’t growing because they were conservative or because of their biblical literalism but because 1) they take God seriously, and 2) they have enthusiastic worship. Mainline congregations have something to learn from this, he said, because they “have grown uncertain about the reality of God.” Their voice is too tentative.

If Borg is correct—and I think he is on to something—how can we speak with a more certain voice? His answer is to embrace pluralism and proclaim an inclusive Christianity:

If [the Christian tradition] accepts its place as one among several traditions, I think it can be even more confident of its truthfulness...

I think Christianity has a far greater credibility when it accepts its relative status than when it claims a unique and essentially triumphant status.

I think that we here know this implicitly. We understand that God is present everywhere, in every crack and crevice of creation, including, of course, different religious traditions and where a faith tradition is absent. And when we become more and more explicit that the Sacred Reality is present everywhere—when we embrace plurality and resist those who would have *one conquering view*, both in the Church and in the world—then we will find more and more vitality. When we become more confident of this truth we will have more life and growth.

Look, as progressive Christians, we’ve learned not to claim too much. We acknowledge the limits of our understanding and see we have only a partial grasp of the truth. This humility is a good thing, but it should not stop us from declaring clearly and confidently that God is within all people, believers and nonbelievers, alike. And all people are held in God’s love—Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, agnostics and atheists.

And so what is an inclusive Christianity? Well, an inclusive Christian community is not merely a community that strives to include all people. That’s physically impossible. An inclusive Christianity points beyond itself. It says, “We are not the whole thing. But we are part of the whole.” We strive to demonstrate in our limited and partial way God’s great impartiality.

Inclusive Christianity is the opposite of what one can call Imperial Christianity. Imperial Christianity seeks to impose one view on all others. It seeks to conquer or convert. It is the Christianity of the Crusades. This mindset seeks to clean the church and drive out all the impurities—all the liberals, progressives and those with different views. It seeks to force its own particular understanding of creation, of birth control and sexuality, of marriage, and of when human life begins, upon the entire nations.

An Inclusive Christianity does not fear encounters with other faith traditions, but embraces them. It sees other traditions not as competition but as being complementary.

In his fascinating book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

Buddhists and Christians alike, in dialogue, want to recognize similarities as well as differences in their traditions. It is good that an orange is an orange and a mango is a mango. The colors, the smells, and the tastes are different, but looking deeply, we see that they are both authentic fruits. Looking more deeply, we can see the sunshine, the rain, the minerals, and the earth in both of them. Only their manifestations are different. Authentic experience makes a religion a true tradition. Religious experience is, above all, human experience. If religions are authentic, they contain the same elements of stability, joy, peace, understanding, and love. The similarities as well as the differences are there. They differ only in terms of emphasis. Glucose and acid are in all fruits, but their degrees differ. We cannot say that one is real fruit and the other is not.

Dialogue does not mean we want others to abandon their own spiritual roots and embrace our faith. Rather, real dialogue leads us to better understand ourselves as well as others who are different. And this is true, come to think of it, not just between religions, but within them.

An inclusive Christian community is not merely a community that strives to include all people—as important as that is. But an inclusive Christianity is primarily a community that points beyond itself and that accepts its relative status. To be an inclusive Christian community is not that we can contain the whole, but that we are merely part of the whole. It is to see ourselves as a community within the broader community, the community of God. May this be a community that points beyond itself, demonstrating God's inclusive, universal love for all.

Make no mistake about it—this is a Christian community. And this table set before us is the table of Jesus. Yet this ritual is open to all people regardless of faith and doctrine, because this community and this table point beyond themselves to the great community in which all become one.

I will end this morning with the words of John Murray, who founded the universalism movement in the 18th century:

*Go out into the highways and by-ways.
Give the people something of your new vision.
You may possess a small light,
But uncover it, let it shine,
Use it in order to bring more light and understanding
To the hearts and minds of men and women.
Give them not hell, but hope and courage;
Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.*