

## April 25, 2021 - Fourth Sunday of Easter

**Meditation:** “Exclusive, or Inclusive?”

I want you to close your eyes (unless you are reading this) and imagine for a moment what the mountain looked like before Jerusalem was built. If you want, imagine it being like an upside-down ice cream cone....one of the conical shaped ones, not one of those flat-bottomed ones. At the very top of the mountain, on the very highest place, that's where the temple will be built. How much flat space is there to build a temple? Not much, right? So, the temple can't be very big, can it? Okay, flash forward several centuries and Herod the Great, not the Herod who was ruling when Jesus was baptized by John, but Herod's father, Herod the Great, who was ruling when Jesus was born, that Herod. Herod the Great is expanding the temple courts, making them much larger. Question: how do you make something built on the tip of a cone bigger than the tip of a cone? Answer: you build massive retaining walls and backfill the area. That was the lifelong project that Herod the Great undertook. Build a retaining wall, fill in the area inside the retaining wall, and then build huge paved courts that Jesus and his contemporaries would visit while they were relatively new.

Starting with the center of the temple we have the Holy of Holies. This is the heart of the temple. It is the windowless room that can only be accessed by a single entrance that is covered with a temple curtain or veil. Inside is the Ark of the Covenant. It is the chest that contains the two stone tablets that Moses carried down the mountain....the tablets with the ten commandments carved into them. That chest is described as either the throne or the footstool of God almighty. The Holy of Holies is entered only once a year, by the high priest, who has a cord tied around his ankle so that he can be pulled out if need be, without risking the life of another who might otherwise have to enter the Holy of Holies.

Outside the Holy of Holies is the Altar where animals are slaughtered and their blood is splashed, and the braziers that contain the fire that the slaughtered beasts are incinerated in. Imagine the sounds of flame and frightened animals. Imagine the smell of blood and fire and smoke. Only the priests are allowed in this area.

Outside of that is the court of the men, where only Jewish men who are ritually clean are allowed. Beyond that is the court of the women, where only Jewish women who are ritually clean are allowed. And Beyond that is the court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews are allowed.

Okay, open your eyes (unless you are reading this and then your eyes are already open.)

Remember last week's lesson from the book of Acts? Peter and John are going into the temple, via the gate called Beautiful, and a lame man begs money of them. The man is outside of the temple area because he is considered ritually unclean, because he is lame. His lameness is the result of either his sin, or the sin of his parents; and because of that sin he is ritually unclean and forbidden from the temple courts. What happened? Do you remember? That's right, Peter and John healed the man, and then led him into the temple courts. In today's reading from the book of Acts, John and Peter are on trial in front of the Sanhedrin for healing the man. And the man is there also, as a witness. John and Peter are on trial for taking an outsider and making him an insider.

I wasn't really sure whether to read the lesson from Acts, or the gospel today. In the gospel we heard Jesus say that he had other sheep that do not belong to this fold, but they must come also and there will be one flock. Jesus is saying there are outsiders who he is going to include, and all will be one. No wonder the religious authorities were upset with him.

This past week I finished the last of the Racial Justice training that the church is offering. Bias can become a Stereotype. When a Stereotype is believed and becomes a value it becomes Prejudice. When Prejudice is acted upon it becomes Discrimination. And when power is added to Discrimination it becomes Systemic Oppression (racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, classism, heterosexism, nationalism, Religious extremism, and so on).

Systemic Oppression is a) active, and b) a system. Here's a quick example. We've all heard this past year that we are all in the same boat with this pandemic. But are we? Some are retired and able to isolate. Others are able to work from home – like me. Others, we'll call them essential workers, have to go to work at the grocery stores and pharmacies and food processing plants and distribution warehouses and schools and child care centers and drive trucks and... The government decided that the vaccine rollout would be based on age, not on risk of contracting the virus. That means that elderly people were vaccinated first. And then the age range would drop by 5 year increments. While the elderly are more likely to experience more severe illness and require hospitalization and die than others, at least for the original virus, others, the working poor are more likely to be exposed to and spread the disease. Because many of these workers do not have paid sick leave, they have to go to work to pay the rent and put food on the table for their families, whether they are sick or not. And because many of them are younger, they still do not qualify for the vaccines. The average age of workers at the Amazon distribution center in Brampton that saw over 100 confirmed cases of Covid-19 is 35. If they were 40,

they could try and get a shot of the Astra Zeneca vaccine at a pharmacy, if they could afford to take a day off work. The fact is, we simply aren't all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm, but we are in very different boats. The system – paid sick leave, paid time off for medical appointments, decisions about vaccine distribution and availability – screams that while the work may be essential, the lives of the workers are not. Just one final note on this...I saw a news report just yesterday that the BC government stepped in to shut down a vaccination drive set up to serve only members of an exclusive country club.

The United Church of Canada has announced its intention to be an anti-racist church. How many of you know what that means? I wasn't sure what it meant when I first heard it. In fact, I was upset about it. I thought, "I'm not a racist, what is all this anti-racist talk about?" So, let's start with racism. Racism is a system that includes, but is not limited to, education, housing, criminal justice, healthcare, and so on that combine to oppress people on the basis of race. An example of this would be taking the best of the land from the First Nations people and putting them on a reserve that contains land that is not fit for farming or resource extraction.

Not-racist, or non-racism is a passive response to racism. It does not require active resistance to the system. It does not require calling out the inequities of the system. And because it is inactive, it means that the system continues. Non-racism is racism by complicity.

Anti-racism is, like racism, a system. It is a system of active resistance to and the dismantling of the system of racism.

It is not enough to be not-racist. We need to be anti-racist. We need to push to dismantle racism and actively promote racial equality. We need to be like Peter and John and recognize that there ought to be no outsider or insider. We need to be like Jesus and reach out beyond the fold to include all in the flock. We need to be a church that goes beyond charity to social justice.

Charity is great, don't get me wrong, but feeding people via a food bank means that the system that keeps people in a place where they have to make decisions between rent, utilities, medical treatments, and food...that system stays unchallenged and continues. In a very real sense, charity is complicity. Social justice, on the other hand, is the active speaking out against and dismantling of that system, so that some day there will be no need of foodbanks. That's what we need to do with issues of race, and all other forms of systemic oppression.

So, where do we go from here? I'm not sure. For me, the next step is mostly listening, and asking how I can help, instead of assuming that some white, middle-class, heterosexual man of a certain age knows best.

Where do you see systemic oppression in your community?

What can we do about it?

When we start to answer those questions we will meet God anew.