

“Exclusive Diversity”

Isaiah 45:1-7

October 22, 2017
Pentecost

20th Sunday after

When I was a child, I was afraid of the “bogeyman”. This frightener of little children was never clearly defined. I always wondered, “Who is this bogeyman?” Was it an evil or violent person?? Was it a monster of some sort? I thought it might be a decent golfer who attacked with a seven iron until I realize that, no, that was the bogeyman.

As I grew up, I learned that there were many “bogeyman” in all aspects life. Even when I arrived at the seminary, I found that there was a theological bogeyman there as well. This veiled entity that slinks around in the darkness and strikes fear into our hearts was a movement called gnosticism. I called it a “bogeyman” because it seemed that whenever we were trying to figure out a heresy, a false teacher, or just a really strange religious body, it was always the fault of gnosticism.

What is gnosticism, you say? It was a movement that taught salvation by secret knowledge (gnosis) that was only open to the enlightened ones. Yet, at the same time, the idea of gnosticism was contained in many religions, Christianity and others, as well as philosophical systems. It made me wonder if gnosticism was exclusive because of the whole secret knowledge thing or inclusive and diverse because of its presence in many religions and philosophies. Or, was it both at the same time?

Some people wonder the same about God. Does He practice exclusivity? Or, is God an inclusive Deity and is diversity His thing? These questions are important and relevant because “exclusivity”, “inclusivity”, and “diversity” are emotionally charged buzzwords in our society today. God’s position on this is crucial.

The greatest “sin” in our modern world these days seems to be exclusivity. To profess absolute truth or claim an unchanging moral standard is to risk being charged with exclusivity. Texts like ours for today infuriate people because of the exclusive claims being made: “I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God,... I am the Lord, who does all these things.” (Isaiah 45:5-6)

On the other hand, the greatest virtue in our modern world seems to be “diversity”. Everyone wants to celebrate diversity and being different. This means that we should not and indeed cannot search for one truth, one morality, or one understanding of God. Rather, we are to accept and rejoice in a variety of ideas and behaviors as being equally true and valid. This

means that all truth is equal, all choices of morality are equal, and all religions and all spiritual practices are equally valuable. Conflict and contradiction are not seen as bad, but proof that we are being inclusive and diverse.

Texts like ours for today are used to make accusations against God and, by implication, against us, His people. God is seen as being too exclusive in his nature by the claims he makes – “I am the Lord, and there is no other, beside me there is no God.” What about all of the other world religions and spiritual philosophies? Many people believe that such a religion devoted to the Lord of the Old Testament is much too restrictive and exclusive.

God is also seen as being not diverse enough in His moral standards found in the 10 Commandments. There are new moralities which exist today and must be accepted and celebrated, so people say.

As Christians, it is difficult to stand up to this cultural avalanche in which we find ourselves. The sheer volume of these ideas in modern media, our schools, our workplaces, and so on may cause us to unknowingly or even knowingly shift our beliefs and actions on controversial subjects – all in the name of diversity. Some Christians may do this because they actually have changed their belief or, perhaps, changes are made simply to end the conflict and restore peace among friends, in a family, among workers, and the like. In the church, we may be tempted to change or drop really certain behaviors in order to get more people to like us, attract more people to our ministry, and give the appearance of being more diverse and inclusive.

If that is the nature of our world in these days – inclusion and diversity to the nth degree, then what is the nature of God? Is God, in all of his dealings with us, really exclusive or inclusive? Does God desire unity or diversity?

Does God practice exclusivity? Yes, He does. In addition to His exclusive claims about Himself listed in our text for today, His actions also reflect exclusivity in spite of the criticism and condemnation of our culture. Our holy God excludes from His presence all who are not holy because they have violated His standards set forth in His law. This applies to the sinful nature into which we were born, as well as the sinful actions which flow from that sinful nature.

There is, I suppose, some small bit of inclusivity here, although not in the way people would like to be. The Bible says that this judgment and condemnation applies to everyone since all have sinned and all have fallen short. All are excluded by God and separated from God because of sin.

But can God also be inclusive in a more positive way? As the gnostic heresy appeared to me to be both exclusive and inclusive, can God be exclusive and inclusive as well? The answer is yes. God is exclusive when it comes to rejecting sin and those who practice it. Yet, at the same time, God is very inclusive when it comes to rescuing those who have sinned and fall short.

God so loved the world (not just Israel) that he gave his only Son so that everyone (not just some) who would believe in Him would not perish but have everlasting life. In Jesus' death on the cross, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not just selected nations or people groups. In Jesus' resurrection from the tomb to life, God was opening the way everlasting life to the world, not just. No "limited atonement" of exclusivity, but the universal atonement inclusive of all.

Such an inclusiveness was no accident and no succumbing to societal pressure on God's part, but it was God's eternal intention and merciful will all along. As His Word says, "God, our Savior,... desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:3-4) No secret gnosis here, but only the gospel – the good news for all people – which is the power of God for salvation to all who believe – no exclusions or limitations.

There is no doubt that we, as Christians face difficult challenges in this inclusive world of diversity. In addition to being faithful ourselves and not wavering, we have a responsibility to help others under our care to be faithful and non-wavering, too. How can we do this? The only way is to proclaim the unvarnished truth of the word of God without worrying about charges of exclusivity, insensitivity, or lack of diversity.

Confidently proclaim the exclusivity of God, as He, Himself did in our text. He alone is God and Lord. Beside him there is no other, there is no God. His commandments and his law alone are our standard besides those there is no other law. Therefore, we shall be held accountable to those standards and will be excluded from God when we violate them.

However, like a diagnosis of a serious disease may be unpleasant but necessary in order to lead to a cure, so also this diagnosis of sin and guilt may be unpleasant and, perhaps, not even known to this generation but is necessary in order to lead to the cure.

Joyfully proclaim that cure, especially its inclusive nature. There is no one for whom Christ did not die. There is no one for whom Christ did not rise from the dead. God approaches all people with His undeserved grace and abundant mercy. Yet He does it in a very personal way. He does it for all,

but He also does it “for you”. Jesus perfectly obeyed the Law of God “for you” to gain His righteousness for you.. Jesus suffered death and hell “for you” to earn forgiveness for all of your sins. Jesus overcame death and the grave “for you” that you might live forever with him.

This “for you” is inclusive – it is for all sins of all time and all places. This “for you” is diverse– it is for all people – all people who have lived, who are living, and who will ever live. This “for you” is inclusive and diverse as John saw in his vision of heaven in the book of Revelation: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

So, you can see there is no real bogeyman to frighten us, either in our childhoods, in gnosticism, or in the exclusive and inclusive truth of the Word of God. God is exclusive in the very best possible way: excluding sin. God is inclusive in the very best way, too: His salvation for you; Jesus work on the cross for you; the gifts of God in His Word & sacraments have been given for you. The kingdom of heaven is for you and all who have received the gift of faith, regardless of nationality, age, race, or anything else that divides us now. The cultural boxes of exclusivity and inclusivity and diversity are much too small for our God. Rather, our God is exclusively and inclusively diverse and thanks be to God for that. Amen