

# The Way of Jesus Includes All

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In my column last week, I affirmed that the heart of the gospel is love. No one is excluded from God's love. God embraces everyone.

Someone asked me this week if I really believed it. Does God really love everyone? Is no one excluded? What about ... and the person listed some people she thought was beyond the bounds of God's love.

I affirmed that I genuinely thought all were loved in the heart of God. They may not be in my heart; it would be hard for me to love some of those people, but I'm not God.

I asked her if she ever noticed how often Jesus eats with outcasts in the gospels. In fact, Jesus did it so often he was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton. It happens repeatedly — "As Jesus sat at dinner in the house many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples." (Matthew 9:10)

In the first century, you didn't eat with people who weren't part of your group, or with those who were beneath you. By eating with these outcasts, Jesus proclaimed that they were insiders. They had value and dignity. They were included. He violated the social boundaries of his day and broke all the rules of social engagement.

Indeed, all four gospels remember Jesus for this practice. He was radically inclusive. His whole message was that God's kingdom was being born among us, and God's way of doing things is overturning human ways.

No wonder the authorities of the day were appalled at Jesus' behaviour. He ate with people whom his society deemed unworthy and untouchable. But that didn't matter for Jesus. Everyone is made in the image of God. All people bear the likeness of God. Everyone has worth and dignity before God.

When we defame, demean, devalue, dehumanize, demonize, and discriminate against any human being, we denigrate God's image or likeness in them, and ultimately, in ourselves as well. Until we begin to see this truth and begin living out this gospel message of inclusion and welcome in our words and actions, we will continue to perpetrate all the ugliness and ungodliness we deplore in the world.

Too often, the church has been guilty of excluding people. We insist they must believe like us, or behave like us, or think like us if they are to belong. But the example of Jesus shows us that that's simply not so. All are included, according to Jesus, because all are made in the image of God. Period. End of story.

Nothing else counts. It simply doesn't matter if you believe differently, or think differently, or behave differently. Our ways of believing and our ways of interpreting the sacred texts, or our ways of living out the faith are not the only valid and viable vehicles of truth.

Therefore, we seek ways to include others. We work at becoming communities of radical inclusion. We do this to follow in the way of Jesus who ate with "tax-collectors and sinners."

Building a church community which is broadly welcoming and inclusive takes time and challenging work. It goes against some of our instincts, and so we work hard not to marginalize others. We learn to interpret our sacred texts, understanding that they were written in a time and world vastly different from ours. We learn to interpret these ancient writings in ever new ways to find the truth for contemporary society in them.

The thing is that the Bible is not God's way of telling us about God. Rather, it is a record of how human beings have thought about God—and that changes. Throughout history, we have

spoken about God in diverse ways, and we have learned that Scripture is not a fossilized truth, but a guide towards faithful ways of speaking about God's love in all the different times of the church's life.

Therefore, we learn to read our sacred scriptures with a keen awareness of the differences between the time they were written and our own time. We cannot just understand them with a naïve literalism. We avail ourselves of the gift of thousands of years of scholarship to help us understand them.

For me, the heart of the gospel is the unconditional love Jesus expressed for everyone. In the Bible, "love" is not a feeling word. It is an action word. I repeat Thomas Jay Oord's definition of love: "To love is to act intentionally, in relational response to God and others, to promote overall well-being."

When we love, we become caring, compassionate people who seek justice and equality for our siblings in the world. We welcome others with the radically inclusive love of God.

The example of Jesus shows us that whenever we embrace another, we will indeed find God. As Victor Hugo wrote in *Les Misérables*, "To love another person is to see the face of God." Whenever we include and welcome another, we will also be welcomed. Like Jesus, we foster a climate of inclusiveness, knowing that all people have value and dignity as people of God.

How can we love those people whom some count as being beyond the love of God? I don't know. It's hard. It's hard for me. It's hard for most people to think about doing it. We can all produce a list of people we think are beyond the power of love. The latest additions to that list might be the shooters in Buffalo and Uvalde.

Yet I continue to believe that God's love is broad, wide, and inclusive enough to include them, and that my faith calls me to work towards being the same kind of radical lover.

In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or we will, surely, perish together as fools."