

The List
Preached by the Rev. Dr. J. Mark Lewis
Retired, Presbyterian Church in Canada
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After nearly four decades of full-time ordained ministry I recently retired, and in my retirement, I asked myself the questions, “What was the point of all that? Why did I just devote four decades of my life to that endeavour?” I probably should have stopped and asked sooner...but I was busy!

Fortunately, the answers were easy and reassuring. I gave forty years of my life to ministry because I was thrilled and excited by the stories of Jesus’ wonderful kindness, compassion and love for all of humanity, particularly that part of humanity which is rejected and excluded by the mainstream.

The stories that have been at the foundation of my life are the stories of Jesus reaching out with love, tenderness and affirmation to the people who had been rejected by their own community.

I love the story of the Bartimaeus, who was blind, and who stood by the side of the road and said, “Jesus, Son of David, if you are able, will you heal me?” And Jesus healed and loved him. I love the story of the lame man who could not get near Jesus because the crowds were so large, but his friends carried him to Jesus and then lowered him to Jesus’ feet through a hole they had cut through the roof. Jesus said to him, “Your sins are forgiven, my friend, pick up your bed and go home.” I love the story in Matthew 8, in which Jesus heals the man with leprosy. I love the story in John 8 of Jesus’ forgiveness for the woman accused of adultery; and how the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees dropped their stones and walked away when they realized that they were in no position to judge or exclude. I love the story of the good Samaritan, told in the context of a society which rejected the Samaritans on the grounds that they were religious half-breeds.

I love the stories of healing, inclusion and affirmation not because they demonstrate God’s power – God has never had any need to prove God’s power – but because they demonstrate how God, in the person of Jesus Christ, dismantles all the barriers erected by humanity.

Jesus took the list of all the people who were not allowed to approach God or fully participate in the life of the church, and turned it into the list of all the people whom the Father loved the most. The world in which Jesus lived had a list of the rejects, the broken, the flawed, the incomplete and the imperfect, and said “These people are not fully acceptable to God.” Jesus took that same list and said these are the ones who are closest to God!

The point of all the healing stories is not that God has power to heal, but that it is the will of God to include and receive everyone. In Jesus community in the first century, it had become the belief of the people that health, wealth and power were outward signs of God’s love and acceptance. Conversely, sickness, poverty and weakness were seen as signs of God’s rejection and punishment. If a person was sick or poor, it was assumed that they, or perhaps their parents, had sinned, and that they deserved their sickness or poverty. When Jesus healed and accepted

the sick and the poor it was an affront to his society. Society, and the church, taught that those people were supposed to be sick, poor, weak and rejected because they had sinned against God. To heal and accept them was to defy God.

The resentment of the church leaders was clear every time Jesus healed the sick. In nearly every story of healing, the church leaders are standing in the background condemning Jesus' actions. In the story of the man with the paralyzed hand, they were so outraged that they planned to kill Jesus (Mark 3:6). In Luke 4:29, they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff because he spoke about God's acceptance of a Lebanese woman and a Syrian Man.

Jesus was not just healing people according to random selection, and the church leaders of his day were not just rejecting people at random. They were all responding to a clear list that appears in Leviticus 21:16-21

The Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: 'For the generations to come, none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is a hunchback or a dwarf, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the food offerings to the Lord. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God.'

When I first read this list, everything began to fall into place! It is as if Jesus came into the world and said, "Bring me the list of all the people whom you reject." And the church was glad to supply the list. But Jesus took the list and turned it into the list of those whom God loved the most. No wonder the church leaders hated him and wanted to kill him. He ruined their system. He destroyed the power they held over the people.

I am aware that language such as "cripple" from Leviticus is offensive and oppressive, but I have continued to use it here rather than try to substitute more inclusive or appropriate language because the whole point of this sermon is that the substance of this list from Leviticus is offensive and evil at its very core.

As a brief aside; I know you are thinking that you are aware of Jesus healing the blind, lame and crippled, but what about a hunchback and a dwarf? Jesus heals a woman with a hunched back in Luke 13:10-17. With respect to the term "dwarf" (דָּבָר or דָּבָר, vávoç) the Hebrew term, which might literally mean "thin" or "not fully developed" is elsewhere used to describe the poorly developed ears of corn in the dream that the Pharaoh of Egypt told to Joseph. For the time being, I am going with the theory that Zacchaeus, "the wee little man" fulfills the criterion for a dwarf, so the list is complete. This theory may need further work...but that is for another time! The idea that a person had to be a certain height in order to fully participate in the Kingdom of God turns the Kingdom into a cheap version of the CNE or Canada's Wonderland...You must be this tall to enter!"

I come back to these stories again and again. Jesus reaching out to the broken and rejected and saying, "You are loved, you are accepted and you are fully included in God's Kingdom." I have

been considering the question of why these stories mean so much to me. I have come to the conclusion that there are two reasons why these stories have been the driving force behind my faith.

Firstly, I find no meaning in religious stuff, or churchy things, or ecclesiastical, institutional jargon. (Ministers are only allowed to say things like this after they retire!) All that matters to me is the goodness, tenderness and inclusive nature of God.

Secondly, the stories of Jesus receiving the rejected, broken, flawed, incomplete and imperfect people mean so much... because I am rejected, broken, flawed, incomplete and imperfect. I am a failure, I have not tried hard enough, I am weak. Every time Jesus reaches out in love to one of those broken people, he is reaching out to me. The stories of healing and forgiveness are my story. I know that not everyone is able to think in these terms. There are some who feel that they have done well in life; that they have come from humble beginnings to great places by virtue of their hard work, good decisions and dedication. God bless those people. I am not among them. I crave the presence of the God who loves the failures.

The list of rejects in Leviticus is only the beginning of the many lists of rejects that the church would like to exclude from full participation in God's Kingdom. The list goes on and on...and in every case, Jesus welcomes into the Kingdom all those whom the church has rejected.

Among the other rejects were:

- Romans – But who can blame the people of Judea for hating the Romans. They were a cruel occupying force and deserved to be rejected...until Jesus started to go into Roman homes and heal the sick. When the people went to Jesus to ask how they should deal with the Romans, they hoped he would tell them to hate them, instead, it was on this occasion that Jesus offered his disciples a new way to interact with all those whom we label as enemies:

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:38-45)

- Greeks – The Greeks were excluded on the basis of their different culture, but in John 12:20-26, Jesus invites them into fellowship.
- Women – In the context of Jesus' society, women were not considered to be fully human beings. They were possessions whose primary value was in the bearing of children. But

Jesus changed the world forever when he sat down at the well in Samaria and interacted with a woman as his equal.

- Children – In the context of Jesus' society, children were little more than chattel, but Jesus set children at the centre of the Kingdom and proclaimed that only those who would become as children would enter
- Gentiles – Gentiles of every description were excluded from the Kingdom until Jesus, in the process of cleansing the temple in Matthew 21, cleared out the Court of the Gentiles and allowed the world to come in.

We knew from the beginning of his ministry that Jesus was going to break down all the barriers and exclusions that had been a part of the church for centuries. And we knew from the beginning that the established church would kill him for doing so. In Luke 4:16-28, Jesus entered the synagogue in Nazareth and, when handed the scroll, read from the messianic prophecy of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free.

Jesus then made the claim that the prophecy in Isaiah was now fulfilled. He was boldly claiming to be the Messiah. You might think that this would upset the church leaders, but it did not. They were impressed with him. But as soon as Jesus went on to remind the people of God's love for the woman whom Elisha saved in Lebanon and Naaman the man whom Elisha healed in Syria, the crowd turned on him. They could not stand the thought of God's love being extended beyond the boundaries of the church. They dragged Jesus out of the synagogue, out of town, and to the edge of a cliff to throw him off. On the very day that his teaching ministry began, Jesus barely escaped with his life. He did not respect the church's list of people who should be excluded.

The core questions in this sermon, and, I believe, the core questions in Jesus ministry are; Who is saved? Who receives God's love? Who is a part of God's Kingdom? The church has always kept a list of people who could not fully participate, and the church is obsessed with its list. Jesus took hold of the list and turned it around. All the people whom the church excluded became the people closest to Jesus, and therefore closest to God. The rejects, the broken, the flawed, the incomplete, the imperfect. The stories of Jesus receiving the excluded people are at the heart of the Gospel.

I am telling you these things because I believe that it is the narrowness, pettiness and exclusiveness of the church that has caused the church to be in such a state of decay and decline today. It is not because we are old fashioned, or traditional, or boring. It is because we have been small-minded, domineering and abusive, all on the basis of our list of excluded people. I want you to have a more generous orthodoxy. I want you to have a broader view of the love of

God. You are the church, and I want you to better represent the magnificent love of God in the world.

The darkest days, and the most evil deeds of the church have all been based on the list of excluded people. When the church excludes people from full participation, those people are devalued, and sometimes they are devalued to the point of being expendable.

The list of excluded people does not belong to ancient history; it also belongs to the modern era. In recent days, the church has excluded women, children, persons of colour, first nations persons, and has discriminated on the basis of gender-identity and sexual orientation. It appears that the church always has to have a list of people who are somehow deemed less worthy than others.

Even in the 21st century, in a time when we think we have made progress with respect to gender equality, women only have full participation in the church in 3% of Christendom. Even in North America, only 11% of Christian congregations are led by women. The abuse of children and first nations persons in the context of the church is well documented and such abuse is always based on the notion that those persons are somehow less than fully human.

When we consider the drastic state of decline in the church in North America, we wrongly attribute the decline to the idea that society is falling away from God. The real cause of the decline is that the church, over the past several decades, has been shown to be abusive, corrupt and discriminatory. We still make a list of those who are not worthy of God's love, and then we act in accordance with that list.

Jesus took the list and destroyed it. One by one, he found the people on the list and loved them. He healed them, welcomed them, lifted them up and gave them back the worth and dignity that had been taken from them by the church. The Gospel is the story of Jesus systematically destroying every barrier and every restriction invented by the church. The history of the church is the history of an institution realizing, bit-by-bit, and far too slowly, that its list is meaningless and hurtful.

I believe that the church is at the dawn of a great revival. Not a revival based on righteousness, holiness, or a new theory of church growth, but a revival based on the rediscovery of the great depth, breadth and width of God's love. The day is coming when the church's man-made layers of abuse, domination and judgement will fall away, and what will be left will be Jesus Christ...healing the blind, the lame, and those with leprosy. They will come to Jesus Christ, who receives and loves the rejected, the broken and the outcast.

We are the bearers of the greatest truth in the universe, that God is love. Go and tell it. Go and live it. Go and enjoy the Good News. Amen.