

Discovering God

Part 2: God is Radically Inclusive.

Matthew 8:5-13 [NIV]

Summary:

In a divided world Jesus' radical inclusivity breaks down barriers and invites everyone—regardless of their background—into the Kingdom of God.

Main Ideas:

We waste so much energy deciding who should be in and who should be out.

Jesus' inclusion of people reveals God's inclusive heart.

We expect God to exclude the people we exclude.

God loves to include.

Jesus' inclusivity comforts the rejected and offends the exclusive.

The faith of the rejected amazes Jesus

Membership in the KoG is dependent on one thing... Trust in Jesus.

Jesus' initial reaction is always to open his arms and say, "Welcome home!"

A Jesus Follower's role is to offer the invitation, not decide who should be allowed into the party.

The inclusion of God is the only thing that can bring the world together.

Invitation:

Take a moment to pray for someone you have rejected.

Read a Gospel and make a note everytime Jesus accepts someone.

Discussion Questions:

1. What stood out, bothered, confused, angered, encouraged, inspired, or comforted you in this week's message?
2. Why do you think people naturally gravitate towards creating divisions, including within churches?
3. Read Ephesians 4:1-6, 1 Peter 3:8, and Galatians 3:28. How do you think we can practice unity and inclusivity even in matters where we strongly disagree?
4. What are some practical steps you can take to help promote inclusion and unity in our church community?
5. How can your group pray for you this week?

Transcript:

ME: Used to be a teacher... One of the worst parts of that job was seeing the kids who weren't accepted.

- Sometimes it was self-inflicted
- Sometimes it's just b/c middle schoolers are mean

These kids would be avoided b/c no one wanted to be associated with them.

And the rest seemed to all have THEIR GROUP, the cliques that wouldn't really associate with each other.

Middle School seemed like just a big game of who's in and who's out.

WE: Sadly things don't seem to change much when we become adults.

We waste so much energy deciding who should be in and who should be out.

We divide ourselves based on our...

- Race/income level/religion/family/politics
- Identify with our group while dehumanizing vilifying anyone outside

It's true even within the Church where these divisions can seem even more intense...

Have our own "Xian" litmus tests...

- What do you believe about...?
- When happens... Feel a little distance open between you.
- Guard goes up... oh its "ONE OF THOSE"

We're all trying to decide who really follows Jesus. Who should be in and who should be out.

But it hasn't always been this way...

What made 1st xians so unique...

- One thing that made them so attractive to their neighbors
- One thing that spread Xianity throughout the Roman Empire and beyond was...

The first community of JF's deliberately included EVERYONE!

- Not always perfect but...

All races/social classes/genders/backgrounds... Were invited in and fully accepted and included.

- Pompeii example: In a world where Slaves and masters wouldn't even die on the same side of the room...
 - JF Slaves and masters prayed together... worked side by side for the better of others
- In a world where women were viewed as property and just deformed men... Men/Women... were seen as equally made in the image of God
- Former pagans and Jews became co-leaders teaching others to love each other.

Why? B/c that was the example set by their master... Jesus.

- Jesus was constantly breaking down walls and inviting everyone to join the KoG.

And as we saw last week... Jesus' interactions with people revealed God's heart toward people.

And Jesus' inclusion of people reveals God's inclusive heart.

In one of the earliest official accounts of Jesus' life, there's a very interesting encounter

- An encounter that reveals how far reaching God's inclusion really is...

GOD: Earliest reliable tradition says it was written by Matthew... hence the name Book of Mathew.

- A Hated Roman tax collector turned one of Jesus' main 12 disciples.

He recorded an interaction that would have shocked and offended many of the people of Jesus' day...

V. 5-6 Centurion: commander of 100 soldiers.

- Most likely Gentile serving in the army of Herod Antipas the puppet king of Rome.
- Who knows what he had had to do to get to where he was....
- Someone who was used to getting what they wanted and not someone you would mess with.

But he comes to Jesus and respectfully/desperately says, "Sir... my servant is in agony"... most likely a personal slave

Now Jesus had every cultural reason to reject this guy...

- Was completely on the other side/team/ was the OUT group.
- He's not a Jew- Strike 1
- He technically works for the Romans- Strike 2
- And it seems he has a slave- Though not the same as US slavery... still not cool- Strike 3

And those standing around probably expected Jesus to reject this guy...

Why? B/c We expect God to exclude the people we exclude.

- And they would've rejected him.

And the way Jesus answers him, it seems like Jesus might be thinking that way...

V. 7 "Shall I come and heal him?"

- "YOU, a slave-owning, foreigner, who works for our enemy wants me to do something for YOU?"
- Jews weren't supposed to go into Gentile homes/even associate with Gentiles.
- Jesus could be seen as saying... "Who do you think you are... I am God. I can't be around such filth."
- "Don't you know that sin separates you from me?"

But as we'll see that's not even close to what Jesus is doing...

- He is giving this man an opportunity to show God's inclusivity.

God loves to include.

V. 8-9 Centurion knew his group was hated.

- Knew he most likely wouldn't be accepted.
- Knew coming to a Jewish Rabbi risked him losing face/reputation.

But he puts away his pride, humbles himself, and comes to Jesus anyway...

B/c he believed Jesus was who he said he was.

Even though he thinks and feels unworthy and had been told people like Jesus will reject him, he knows he needs Jesus to heal his servant... so he comes to Jesus with his request.

And all around us (at work, school, family, churches) there are people who know they are rejected by church people...

- Who have been told that God is mad at them and rejects them
- But they are still willing to pray, study the scriptures, ask questions, even come to a church gathering and join small groups b/c they want Jesus.

The stories I've heard about people just looking for somewhere they will feel safe to discover, enjoy, and share Jesus have been heartbreaking.

- Guys walking in parking lot... "Would we be accepted looking like this?"
- "When you say you are FOR Salem are you really FOR all of Salem or just those who are like you?"
- "My daughter, who was born as my son, just started college and doesn't know anyone in town is looking for a community that will love and care for her."
- "I don't believe exactly like you might... will my thoughts and views be respected?"
- Stories of straight up rejection or subtle ignoring by people who say they follow the Jesus we are reading about right now.

If you have a story of being rejected by a church or church person b/c of who you are...

- If you have a secret or a not so secret part of you that you know is usually not accepted by church people
- Jesus' reaction and words that we're going to read next are for you...

AND... If you've ever felt like someone shouldn't be allowed in for some reason... then pay attention to Jesus here... he has a lesson for all of us. Maybe even an offensive lesson.

Jesus' inclusivity comforts the rejected and offends the exclusive.

V. 10 Most of the time when we see this word, AMAZED, in the story of Jesus it's the people being amazed at Jesus' miracles... They can't believe what they just saw.

But this centurion turns the tables... and it's Jesus' turn to be amazed.

The faith of the rejected amazes Jesus

To be told you are so sinful God is against you/to experience "his people" being against you...

- And still want/try to find/follow/love this God... completely blows Jesus' mind!

Faith: Religious word for Trust.

In this sense it's... Trusting Jesus is who he said he is and can do what he says he can do.

Centurion didn't know much about Jesus... but trusted completely Jesus could heal his slave.

- Trusted that Jesus could do something for him.
- And Jesus is amazed.

And then Jesus makes it even more offensive for those who see themselves as the ones who are "in."

V. 11-12 SO OFFENSIVE TO JEWS STANDING THERE.

In the Jewish mind, to sit at a table with a Gentile meant you would “catch” the Gentile’s uncleanness.

But Jesus is saying that the patriarchs, the ones through whom God started the Jewish race...

- Will one day sit equally at God’s banquet with the rejected Gentiles as God’s fellow guests.

Jesus: “Hey Jews... Those people you’ve been taught to reject, that you’ve called unclean dogs, that you love to hate, those that have been and are oppressing you/abusing you... many of them will be invited in to eat with the patriarchs while many of you, who call yourselves “The pure chosen people of God,” will be left out.”

See, this interaction is God shouting to the world that the only requirement to be included in his family is a faith that trusts Jesus is who he says he is and can/will do what he says he will do.

- **Membership in the KoG is dependent on one thing... Trust in Jesus.**
- Trusting his identity/love/acceptance/forgiveness
- Not race, gender, political leanings, nationality, patriotism, orientation, not whether or not you think this or that is a sin, or anything else we try to use to divide ourselves.

And then to prove that the centurion was truly accepted and invited... It's Jesus' turn to amaze some people.

V. 13. What Jesus did is amazing.

But what amazes me even more is what he didn’t do.

- Didn’t judge, preach, require anything
- Didn’t speak the truth in love to let the man know he was a sinner.
- Every knee jerk reaction I would probably have... Jesus didn’t have.

Jesus isn’t looking for us to follow a set of rules or fit a certain mold. Jesus is only looking for trust.

- And it’s out of that trust that our lives begin to transform.

YOU: See, when we are all asking, “Who exactly should be let in and who should be kept out? What rules/requirements should we have to determine who’s really in?”

- Jesus asks, “Who wants in?”

When our initial reaction is to cross our arms... Furrow our brow...

- And say, “Hmmm let me think about this.
- “Is this ok? Is this really allowed? If we let them in, are we breaking any rules?”
- “Do they fit the right criteria? Is there a verse for this? Are we on a slippery slope?”

Jesus' initial reaction is always to open his arms and say, “Welcome home!”

Listen... If you’ve felt excluded/rejected.

- By family, colleagues, classmates, churches.

I’m so sorry. Jesus sees you. He is not pushing you away.

- He accepts you. He will never push you away.

- He died and rose again to include all of us, any one who wants it, into the family of God.
- You are invited, you are accepted, you are loved, and you are included.

Jesus is asking you right now... Do you want to be in?

- If so... He says, "Just trust me and you're in."

Your desire to follow Jesus amazes him! He is so impressed by you and proud of you and can't wait for you to enjoy him and the life he gives you more and more everyday.

Now many of us, whether knowingly or not, have been part of excluding people from the KoG.

Many of us, including myself, need to repent of our attitudes, and of thinking we can speak for Jesus and judge and reject those he is inviting.

Maybe we need to extend some sincere apologies to people we have hurt...

- Even if we thought we were right or upholding truth.
- Rejecting people b/c we are right and they are wrong... is wrong

Now listen... I am not saying we all have to agree and see eye to eye on every issue, but if you are a JF we are to represent Jesus...

- A JF's role is to offer the invitation, not decide who should be allowed into the party.

Now I know there's an elephant in the room. So let's talk about it...

One of the most excluded groups in the American church is right now is LGBTQ+ people.

- They know it... they know what many "xians" think about them and say about them...
- And yet some of these people still choose to be part of the church.

Why do they do it? B/c they want Jesus... They love Jesus no matter how much his people have hurt them.

A man I respect once said, "An LGBTQ+ person who still wants to be part of a church, even after how the church has historically treated the gay community, has more faith than most of us."

- And Jesus is amazed at them.
- They say "I might not be accepted here, but I'm going to try it anyway b/c I love Jesus..." amazing

And to be honest this acceptance/inclusion is something we at CCC are still journeying through as a church community.

- We are asking, "What does Jesus' love and inclusion truly look like in the nitty-gritty details of real life?"

And in our little community we don't all see eye to eye...

- We have people who believe anything other than man/woman marriage is a sin
- We have LGBTQ+ people
- We have people who are straight and are LGBTQ+ allies
- We have people who honestly just don't know what to think. But want to love like Jesus.

And there is a place at the table of Jesus and CCC for all of these people.

- A place at the table doesn't mean just tolerating each other....
- It's seeing each other as "US." Seeing this community as OUR community.

We're not naive... We know we can't all be "right"

J didn't tell us to prove we're right... Told us is to 🙄 like HIM.

And what we do know is that every single one of those people, wherever they land, are invited into the family of God by Jesus himself.

- Have an equal seat at the feast of God

And we are not going to do anything to get in the way of that invitation

- We have decided and committed to this not being something we will divide over.

We choose to follow Jesus' brother James' advice in **Acts 15:19**

- Not make it difficult for those who are coming to Jesus.

And yeah we might get things wrong... I'm sure we have.

And as we walk together we might misunderstand each other

And it is and will continue to be messy.

- But we are on a journey together.

And while we may not always understand or agree with one another on every issue, our shared trust in Jesus is what binds us together.

Our commitment is not to uniformity, but to unity in Jesus.

So here's my invitation this week...

Take a moment to pray for someone you have rejected.

- Maybe reach out to them, apologize if appropriate, and ask them to share their story with you.
- Maybe even invite them to share a meal... the JESUS WAY.

Read a Gospel and make a note everytime Jesus accepts someone.

- It might be a comfort to you to remind you you are accepted/included.
- Or it might be a little reprimand to remind you to accept/included as you have been accepted/included.

WE: Jesus invites all of us to join his kingdom.

He lived and died and rose again for the world, all of us.

- It's often easy for us to accept that for ourselves but not for others.

The same death Jesus died for you he died for them.

The same invitation he gives you, with all of your faults, he gives to everyone else.

Imagine being the church that truly embodies Jesus' radical inclusion

- A church that's a beacon of hope in a fractured world.
- This is what the world is desperate for: a community where every single person, no matter their story, feels the love of Jesus.

Let's be that place! Let's embody the open arms of Jesus with no exceptions... together.

The inclusion of God is the only thing that can bring the world together.