

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**January 22, 2023**  
**Galatians 3:26–28, John 13:34**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Startle us, O God. Crack open our hearts and minds to what you would say to us this day. Shake us from complacency, challenge us to new understanding and insight to see beyond ourselves and to where you would lead us in new ways. In Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Galatians 3:26-28**

“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

**John 13:34**

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

We continue in our sermon series on the values of Oak Grove Presbyterian Church. As I mentioned last week, because we are the Body of Christ, that is, a community that seeks to follow Jesus, our primary foundation is the life of Jesus as revealed to us in scripture, and as we are guided in our understanding by the Holy Spirit, and our theological tradition. Beyond our faith in God, our example in Jesus, and guidance from Holy Spirit, our congregational values are the underlying ethic by which we define our community. Our congregational values are

a way to explicitly name the things we hold most important as we consider what it means to be a part of the Body of Christ and how we behave and make decisions. These values are both operative and aspirational; that is, we already see them working in our community and they are those things we aspire to consistently embody. The value we explore today is the value of INCLUSIVITY.

Inclusivity as our value means Oak Grove Presbyterian is open and welcoming of all people, particularly to those on the margins or those otherwise excluded. The gospel challenges us to see all people, including those not like us or who do not hold similar values or understandings, as our neighbor. In as much as possible, we are to love and welcome everyone.

Inclusivity is such a good word. It gives many warm feelings, it is inviting. And that is true, and it is bigger than just being nice. It can be a little more challenging.

There are many different stories and words from scripture that highlight God's inclusive love. But the reading from Galatians may be one of the shortest and most illustrative examples of just how radical God's inclusive love is.

I have said before, as a general rule, we humans, we like order and structure. We like things to be in their place. We like to be able to label and sort and know the difference between us and them. We want to know the good and the bad. Who's in and who's out.

When Paul writes in Galatians that because of Jesus there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, no longer male and female, this is a glimpse of the breadth and depth of God's love. It's not about dismissing difference, but it is about putting our self-worth in the correct place, it's not in our gender, our nationality, our orientation, our status, or any

other label we might try to use to diminish the worth of someone, but rather it is the fact that we are all children of God and that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. There is a rabbinical saying to the effect of that when we look at humanity, all humanity, we should say: “Make way, make way for the image of God!”

The church today continues to struggle with who should belong – who’s in and who’s out – who exactly, we want to know is made in the image of God?

But scripture tells us that we better be careful whenever we put limits on God’s love, we better be careful about naming anyone unworthy. We need to be wary to declare someone is outside the bounds of God’s love.

When we think of the stories of Jesus’ life and encounters with people, it is full of him reaching out to those that were excluded. He purposefully reached out to those who others wouldn’t—people like the Samaritan woman at the well ([John 4:1-42](#)), people like the lepers ([Luke 17:11-19](#)) and the blind ([Mark 10:46-52](#)) and the demon-possessed ([Mark 5:1-20](#)), and the woman caught in adultery ([John 8:1-11](#))—it seems to starkly contrast the idea that people first have to get it right.

Jesus talked to people other’s disregarded, he touched people he shouldn’t have, he ate with the wrong people, he welcomed children.

Jesus demonstrates the love of God in love that is unconditional, He reflects what I think God calls the church into again and again – an ever-expanding circle that is transformed for the good as it welcomes more and more people, even the people we didn’t think deserved it.

And it isn’t just Jesus that expands the circle of inclusive love. At the beginning of Acts, the book that describes the early beginning of the Body of Christ, Jesus leaves his disciples with the charge to make disciples in Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, to spread

the good news in ever widening circles. The disciples were expected to expand enlarge the circle and make more room at the table.

The expansion of the church included a diversity of people, not just Jews, but also Gentiles. Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, Peter eats with Cornelius, a Roman soldier, stories of people that one would not expect to be included into the faith community, outsiders and those deemed unclean. The church is more inclusive than ever thought imaginable.

David Hayward is a former pastor, who left ministry to follow another passion, which was to be an artists and cartoonist. His cartoons are simple, often just one panel cartoons. But they are profound and deeply theological, and I think they demonstrate God's love well. This is one of my favorites.



Credit: <https://nakedpastor.com/blogs/news/the-jesus-eraser>

In the picture, you see people drawing lines, boxes, to delineate boundaries, to make sure where the boundaries are. That way we can tell who is in and who is out. But in the middle of the picture is Jesus, and he

is using the other end of the pencil, the one with the eraser, and he is doing his best to erase those boundary lines that we humans create.

The Westminster Longer Catechism is part of the Book of Confessions in the Presbyterian Church, and it is made up of 196 questions and answers about the Christian faith. Part of the questions talk about the Ten Commandments and not that the first four are about our relationship with God, and the final six are about our relationship with others. ,

The 122 questions ask, “What is the sum of the six commandments which contain our duty to [humans]?” The answer is “The sum of the six commandments which contain our duty to [humans], is, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to do to others what we would have them to do to us.”

All humans are equal.

The 131 questions ask, “What are the duties of equals?” And the answer is, “The duties of equals are, to regard the dignity and worth of each other, in giving honor to go one before another; and to rejoice in each other’s gifts and advancement, as their own.”

The next question asks, “What are the sins of equals?” And the answer is, “The sins of equals are, besides the neglect of the duties required, the undervaluing of the worth, envying the gifts, grieving at the advancement or prosperity one of another; and usurping pre-eminence one over another.”

We are to see one another as equals, and it is a sin to undervalue the worth of another person. We are all children of God.

The church has not always been good at this, and it continues to not do good at this. The church has done great harm. For too long, and in our current day, race, gender, gender identity, and sexuality have been used to restrict or bar people from full inclusion, affirmation, and engagement

with faith communities. They are either barred explicitly or asked to not be fully honest or bring their full selves in order to be welcomed or let through the door.

It is important that we be explicit in inclusion and welcome. The flags that we have purposively chosen to display in front of our church are a tangible sign of our commitment to inclusivity and let people know in a very quick way what we are about. This is why it is so important that we are explicit in our welcome and why we cannot ever assume we have arrived at a place where we can stop being explicit about this welcome. We might think we are welcoming, but it is important to remember that for many still, the first question that comes to mind when they think of church is, “What is to prevent me from worshipping here, what is to prevent me from being baptized here, what is to prevent me from being in leadership here, what is prevent me from being loved here?” “Am I really loved?”

Very recently, we received some feedback from a person who came to the church to help lead an event. They were told that we were a welcoming church, but based on previous experiences with churches, this person found it hard to believe and really didn't believe that Oak Grove was welcoming to LGBTQIA persons. After spending some time here, this person told a church member that they had never been in a church where it was safe to be out. This person was so impressed with the inclusivity and welcome of Oak Grove that they were considering bringing their spouse because they couldn't believe this type of church exists. It matters that we are a church of inclusivity. I believe it is a matter of life and death.

I told you within my first few weeks of arriving here a little less than two years ago (19 months ago), that one of the reasons I was excited to be one of your pastors was because of Oak Grove's commitment to

inclusivity. It is important to me to be part of a church that has a wide view and understanding of God's love. I told you then, and I still believe, that I want to be a part of a community that understood that to be Christian was to be about breaking boundaries, about crushing barriers that stood in the way.

I want to be a part of a faith that calls me outside of myself and pushes me to examine my own prejudices and calls me to account. God calls us out to break down barriers, tear down dividing lines, question the status quo, and question our own prejudices. Not just for the sake of breaking rules or norms, but because there are times when God might be calling us to do just that so that all may live more fully into the reality of God's impartiality.

It's great to know we are created by God, and called by God to be in service, to know that we are gifted, and that we have to practice our faith, and to care for one another, but mostly, we can do all of that and remain safe. But we are called beyond being safe. We are called outside of ourselves, outside of our preconceptions and our prejudices, so that all may feel the wide welcome of God.

And I also told you, sometimes that's scary. Sometimes it means we will be uncomfortable. I am often quite happy to stay comfortable in my own world, with people that I know, and who think, and act just like me. I am content to not have to face my own prejudices and hate. Most times I am comfortable with not breaking the rules and getting in trouble with my superiors, my congregation, my peers, or my family. Sometimes it's scary to rock the boat. However, and this is a big however, our God truly shows no partiality and our God is a God of reconciliation, and we have been called into a ministry of reconciliation where all people are made in the image of God, where all people have worth, where all people have

dignity, where there is no stranger, and we are called to action to help bring about that reality.

I imagine that many, if not most, of you feel in a similar way. That one main reason you are a part of this church is because we try our hardest to live into this reality every day, an ever expansive, open, welcome, inclusive, and diverse church. We believe that when God says that Jesus came into the world for the whole world, that God meant exactly that, for everyone, no exclusions.

And I also wonder, before we get too complacent, or self-congratulatory, I wonder where we might still be drawing lines where Jesus is erasing them? What might the Spirit be doing with us. How are we being challenged by our commitment to inclusivity? Inclusive, as I said, seems like such a nice word but it's a challenging word. And so, I wonder where we might be falling behind? I wonder how the Spirit is calling us to a new understanding, I wonder to where and in what ways the Spirit is calling this church to be even more inclusive in its understanding of God's expansive love for all.

I believe the church should be a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God where there is reconciliation and a new community where all are valued for the people who God made them to be.

To be fully inclusive, I leave us with these questions:

What boundaries do we still need to erase?

What persons do we need to welcome to the table? Or better yet, whose table do we need to go and sit at?

Where is the Spirit nudging us?

Amen