



Resurrecting the Bible as the People's Book!

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Brookside Community Church

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Mark 5:21-43



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Truly inclusive Christian communities have the audacity to wrestle with the Bible. That is what it looks like to act with faith in God. They do this by joining with the generations before them, and inspiring those who will come after them, in the struggle to become faithfully human.

Faith as Audacity

“If I just but touch him!” She thought. “If I just but touch his clothes,” she said to herself, “I will be made well.”

Many words have multiple meanings, and sometimes those multiple meanings are present at the same time. Audacity is a word that works like that. If I use the word “audacity” to describe the hemorrhaging woman in the story this morning, I think most people would agree with that it is appropriate. The real question would be, I think, what do we mean by this word? Audacity—she was bold, daring, fearless, courageous. She had grit! Perhaps that is not what we mean: Audacity—she was defiant, rude, insolent, arrogant, improper, lacking manners.

I can imagine some people watching her and saying, “Wow! She had the audacity to come in here, where she knew she was not welcome, and walk through a crowd of people, right to the front and grab him! I wish I had the nerve to do that!” (Nerve, by the way, is another one of those words that are rich with meaning.)

I can also imagine some people watching her and saying, “Wow! She had the audacity to come in here, where she knew she was not welcome, and and walk through a crowd of people, right to the front and grab him! Oh, the nerve of some people!”

If we can shortly think for a minute about this story, we see it is clearly a story about exclusion. She had the nerve to overcome it, though the crowd pushed her away. She had the audacity to persist, despite the social taboos, the religious restrictions, the public shame that she might face. “If I can just touch him!” She said. And Jesus responded, “Your faith has made you well. Go in peace.”

If we were looking for an illustration about what faith in Jesus looks like, this morning’s passage suggests that faith, when it is active, might also be one of those synonyms for audacity! In other words, Jesus’ response to her might have just as well been, “Your audacity has made you well.” I want to submit to you this morning that when we act in faith, some people might say “Wow! They have such faith! I wish I had that!” While others might say, “Oh, the nerve of some people!”

And we have to have faith, a kind of audacious faith, if we want to help the broken of the world find healing. We need to be an audacious people to have the conversations that we really need to have to get to the place God calls us to be. Far too often, our religious communities have used our sacred texts as a tool of violent exclusion. Passages have been read out of context to justify treating people as subhuman. Passages are still read today in a way that provides the language for some of the most extreme forms of hatred. And there are those who, despite this, have the audacity to press against those faith communities and press against God and say, “If I could just get your attention, maybe I could change your mind about me!”

Rethinking the Bible

So our agenda this morning is to be audacious and rethink our relationship to our sacred text: the Bible. Over the next few weeks we're going to be exploring what the Bible says about homosexuality, but before we get there, it will do us well just to focus some attention directly on the Bible.

If someone were to ask you to tell them why the Bible is important, how would you respond. Some people think of it as an answer book. (I think it raises more questions than it does provide answers.) Some people think it is a rule book. (Yet, as I mentioned last week, it is filled with examples of people of faith who refused to be those who merely follow the rules.) Some people believe this book is infallible, that it somehow came straight from the mind of God. (And yet, we know it did not. The stories themselves describe communities of people who were wrestling together throughout generations.) I think of the Bible as the Book of the People. Let me tell you what I mean.

For me, I would talk about the growth rings of a tree.

I find growth rings in trees fascinating, even mystical. Most of us know, some of you are quite experts at this, that if you look at a cross section of a tree and count its growth rings, you can get a good idea of the tree's age. We've all seen this before, right? So picture in your head the concentric circles of a tree trunk. Trees have this central core which corresponds to the tree's first years of growth, and then the rings expand out until the most recent year of growth is the outermost ring. Each ring tells a story, and those stories work together to help tell a larger story, something of a history of the tree and its environment.

I think that image can help us as we think together today about the Bible, what it is, and how we can use it as a people with an audacious and inclusive faith. Our sacred stories work like the rings of a tree; this can help us make sense of how our sacred stories work and what this holy book is for.

We all know that Christianity has a terrible history of using the Bible as a tool for exclusion. Many times throughout history it has been used to justify very un-Christlike ideas, attitudes, and actions. Sometimes, it has been used to foster political movements that resulted in mass violence and destruction. If we want to claim this book as our book too, then this is a history we must always keep in front of us. Ultimately, our goal is to learn to read the Bible repentantly and with integrity, but in a way that allows us to be more faithful as followers of Jesus. That is, I believe the Bible—when rightly understood—can be read with care from a heart tuned toward healing and wholeness, and that it can still help us become the welcoming and inclusive faith community God is calling us to be.

We will talk next week more about Biblical interpretation. This week, I simply want to help us rethink three important questions about the Bible: What is it? Where did it come from? and What we are supposed to do with it?

I remember the first time I thought of the Bible like a tree with growth rings. I was sitting in a synagogue taking a class on Biblical interpretation by a Rabbi. He opened up a copy of the Talmud

and was explaining to us how it works. In the center were the core teachings, the “oral Torah.” Then, all around the margins were the interpretation and the commentary. I remember asking, “So, the oldest and most authoritative is in the center. And the newer and less authoritative parts wrap around it. It works like a tree.” The Rabbi responded, “Well, sort of. Except, when you say authoritative, I say sacred. And when I say sacred, I don’t mean that one part of it is more sacred than the other. For us, it is the debate, the argument, the response, the interpretive reasoning that is sacred. That is what we work for.” I looked down at my own Bible and saw the text, then the commentaries, and then my own notes in the margins. I realized that my life—lived in response to the text—is my contribution to the text itself. My life is like the outer-most ring of the tree.

Religion Shaped the Bible, Shapes Religion

The Bible itself is a collection of the sacred writings of a community covenanting together to try and understand who they are, who God is, and how to live faithful lives. Unlike some people believe, the Bible did not come out of thin air, it was not dropped out of heaven. It was written by human beings over the course of hundreds and thousands of years, in their own contexts, wrestling with the most important questions together as a people of faith. Over the course of time, it was read, revised, explained, and debated. This is not just true of the authors of the Bible and those who follow them, but is demonstrated in many ways within the biblical text. In short, the Bible is a communal book, with many voices, that tells a communal history and invites us to participate. It is the book of the people of God, with the people’s voices.

Like most pastors, I have shelves filled with commentaries and entire volume-length studies on particular books of the Bible. Benjamin D. Sommer, a scholar and professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote that “The religion that *generated* the Bible foreshadows the religions *generated by* the Bible.”¹ What he means is that our current practice of writing commentaries, and even Jewish Midrash, is not just a post biblical invention used by Rabbis and scholars to interpret or revise the Bible as they see fit. “It is a biblical means of relating to the Bible, which the Rabbis inherited from the biblical authors themselves.”²

Just taking a short glance at the compositional history of the Bible will show us this. Take Genesis through 2 Kings, for instance. The Hebrew text wasn’t even invented until sometime around 1000 BCE. Scholars generally assume that Deuteronomy 12-26 is possibly the first of these texts. This is what is referred to as “the scroll of the Torah,” found (or composed) during Josiah’s reform in the 7th century, BCE. Then, during the Babylonian Exile, a school of scribes gathered writings and composed what is known as the Deuteronomistic History, which consists of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings. Then, sometime after the Babylonian Exile, perhaps during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, a group of scholars merged another set of scrolls together. What is fascinating to me is that, if you look up “textual criticism,” or the “documentary hypothesis,” or JPED, what you will find is that the Pentateuch is really the merger of at least four different authors. Genesis isn’t just one book, it is

¹ Benjamin D. Sommer, “Inner-biblical Interpretation,” in *The Jewish Study Bible* (2004) 1829-1835.

² *ibid.*

several all squished together. That is why you find the same stories repeated multiple times, told in different ways, right next to each other. That is because they are different versions of the same stories, written by different authors.

The Bible is a conversation book. It is the community's book.

The story goes on and on. Over the course of history, books are added and subtracted, edited, interpreted and revised. Commentaries are made. Parts are debated. And this is what makes it a living book—because we are invited to participate in it.

We are Like Trees

So, to end today, I simply want to encourage you to think of your lives as the outer layer of that tree. If we take this book—which many think might have had its last breath—and have the audacity to bring it before Jesus, we might just hear Jesus say to us, “Get up!”

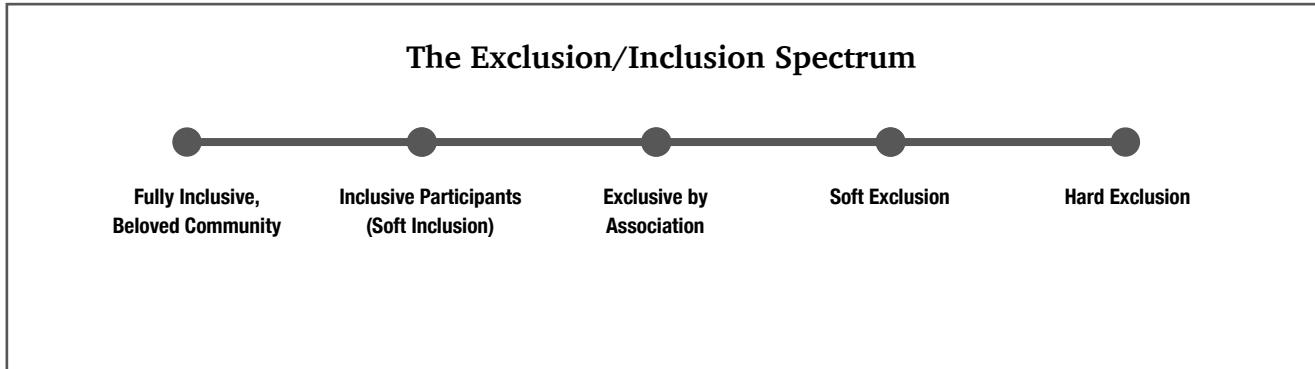
And when the Bible is resurrected, it will be resurrected in the lives of a people who are able to wrestle with it over the most important things. When the Bible is seen as authoritative words that can't be argued with, a set of rules that we cannot question, then the book will become useless—or worse, deadly. But if we are able to see our lives as the embodiment of a people wrestling together with it, it will come alive in us.

Tabitha Cumi, May it be so!

—Amen

Reflection Worksheet

Part 1: The Spectrum of Exclusion



Definitions

- **Hard Exclusion:** All forms of outright, active exclusion and hate groups, including white supremacy, religious intolerance, misogyny, etc.
- **Soft Exclusion:** Those who are uncomfortable affirming or interacting with people who are excluded from the dominant society. They are operating from a place of social privilege with an active fear of the “the other”: xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, etc.
- **Exclusive by Association:** Those who are uncomfortable being inclusive out of fear of being excluded by the dominant community.
- **Inclusive Participants (Soft Inclusion):** Those who want to be inclusive, but still continue to operate within an exclusivist framework. They may claim to be inclusive, but they do not actively participate in changing the situation because they want to continue to benefit from being at a place of privilege inside an exclusivist environment.
- **Fully Inclusive, Beloved Community:** Those who not only welcome difference but fully affirm it, celebrate it, and even seek after it. Here, inclusion is coupled with an expectation of learning new ways of thinking, new languages, new practices, and other ways to overcome our oppressive, exclusive tendencies.

Questions for Conversation and Reflection

- 1) In the story about Barbara Dane's experience, which character do you most easily identify with (the worker, the pharmacist, or the child)?
- 2) Do you find it easy or difficult to identify with the excluded person in Barbara Dane's story?
- 3) Where on the Exclusion Spectrum do you see yourself? Where do you see your congregation?
- 4) Take some time to reflect on the things that make inclusion scary?

Reflection Worksheet

Part 2: The Bible is the People's Book

