

“Include Them”

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*1st Presbyterian Church
Wilkes-Barre, PA
Jonah 3:6-4:3
Mark 9:38-41*

How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?

- Three, but they're really one.

How many Quakers does it take to change a light bulb?

- Ten to sit around in a circle until one feels the inner light.

How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb?

- Ten, one to actually change the bulb and nine to say how much they liked the old one.

How many Fundamentalists does it take to change a light bulb?

- The Bible does not say anything about light bulbs!

How many Zen Buddhists does it take to change a light bulb?

- Two, one to change it, and one not to change it.

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?

- None. Lights will go on and off at predestined times.

How many Unitarians does it take to change a light bulb?

We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb.

However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship with your light bulb, and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, three-way, long-life and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

Quakers, Episcopalians, Fundamentalists, Zen Buddhists, Presbyterians, Unitarians – and a plethora of other religious traditions span our world. Thousands of Christian denominations dot the landscape of America. And within our highly religious world (and contrary to all too recent secular thinking; this is a highly religious world!), there are voices of inclusion and voices of exclusion. And which ever voice holds the day – will make a world of difference! Cultural uniqueness (changing light bulbs) if you will, must make room for each other.

Last week I began a three part sermon series, predicated on the gift you received last week, or this morning (that beautiful refrigerator magnet), which proudly proclaims First Presbyterian Church is a Friendly, Inclusive and Welcoming Church!

I'll confess, I've been like a child. We've had these magnets in the church office for several weeks. I couldn't wait to have them passed out! I hope you will place this gift on your refrigerator, and when you see it, as you

go for your yoghurt and skim milk – you will think of Christ’s church, and say a prayer for your pastor, and our ministry. (And remember to check out our website!)

Last week I shared about our being a Friendly church! And we truly are! This morning I want to share about our being and Inclusive church. And next week, how we are a Welcoming church.

We are an inclusive church! Yes, we have our reformed tradition that goes back to our founding in the late 18th century here in the Wyoming Valley, and further back to 16th century Geneva, Switzerland and John Calvin.

We have our cultural identity, our way of changing light bulbs – but this identity has evolved into identity with open arms.

Our ministry is inclusive! We are interested in enveloping as many people as possible within our congregation, and relating to as many people, groups, outside our church as possible.

Our position is openness, acceptance, and inclusion. You see this is a perspective, a way of living. Far too many churches, individuals are concentrating on what excludes others from their ranks. Too many major in a narrow list of “don’ts, unacceptable, no-ways.” They restrict and criticize – exclude.

Of course we have values – Love, hope, forgiveness, justice, acceptance, understanding – to name a few. And from these Christ like values we open our arms and include:

- Multiple Christian denominations are represented in our pew.
- We are to the best of my/our ability respectful “freedom of thought.” I will not chide you for being an “Infralapsarian.”
- Sexual orientation is not an issue. Gays/Lesbians are God’s children, and are welcome.
- Other Religions are respected. Temple Israel and First Presbyterian Church have for generations developed a deep friendship through their Rabbis and pastors. The Rabbis has spoken from this pulpit on numerous Sunday mornings. I have done the same, at the Temple on Saturday mornings. A week ago yesterday, Shawn and I were honored to sing at the Temple in celebration of an 85 yr old friend’s remembering his Bar Mitzvah. We had a wonderful time! What a blessing!

First Presbyterian Church is inclusive!

Friends this is a well thought out - Theological/social position! For humankind it makes sense!

Getting to know our world neighbors is of prime importance. Getting to know their ways of doing things. Getting to know their values, and determining the compatibility of values is a must!!

And, in our small part of the world, our vision, what we understand as Christ’s vision, is to be more embracing, not less! To be more open armed, not less! To be more inclusive, not less! Looking for reasons to include, not exclude! That’s our path! My friends, it is a small thing that we include all to the Lord’s Table! Inclusive!

Jonah was one of those “let’s keep the circle small. Let’s keep as many out as possible” mentalities. Exclusion was his mantra, not unlike too many today. God calls him to go to a city, unlike his own. A people not like himself, or his clan. What does he do? He runs in the wrong direction. For he knows something about his God and it troubles him. Finally, Jonah gets to Ninevah, but basically kicking and screaming all the way. For it happened! It happened just the way Jonah feared it would. He preaches repentance. They (those “others”, not like us) repent and God forgives. This God is inclusive!! This God goes beyond the tribal mentality. Jonah is displeased! Jonah is...angry! He complains, “I knew it! That’s why I took off. I knew that you were a

gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and are willing to repent of evil, to change your mind.”

How sad for Jonah. He wishes he were dead. How narrow. How hurtful and destructive if he would have gotten his exclusive way!

And what about Jesus’ disciples? How inclusive was their vision? John says to Jesus, rather complains to Jesus, “Teacher we saw this guy doing ministry, helping people; doing it in your name. But, can you imagine, he wasn’t following us. He wasn’t a part of our denomination. He didn’t even know the special handshake and he was wearing the wrong color scheme.” (Or something like that.) John goes on, “Well, we set him straight! We dissed him royally! We told him to get lost, scram, make like a tree and leave. He wasn’t one of us!”

And I love how Jesus responded. Straight to the point! “Do not stop him!” No equivocation. No cultural test. No theological gymnastics, just; “Do not stop him!” “This fellow, using my name, is doing good, what’s expected of him. You guys, get this, ‘If he is not against us, he is for us!’”

Do you see it?! Jesus’ gaze is to include as many as possible. There are limits, but not when it comes to doing good!

There are too many Jonahs, running in the wrong direction – confirmed in their belief that many more should be excluded, than included. But, I’ll give Jonah this much, at least he knew the type of God he was following. He knew that his God was more open than closed, more inclusive than exclusive.

Today, too many worldwide seem to lack this understanding. Their God, in his attributes lacks any sense of inclusiveness. And this is dangerous! Tribalism is on the increase.

My friends, make sure your children, grandchildren, and other children hear about this inclusive God!

The world hangs in the balance. Tribalism or inclusion? We can help. Bring you children, grandchildren, neighborhood children to our church. We can share with them, Jonah’s God and Jonah’s mistake.

We proudly proclaim what Jonah whined;

“I know that you are a gracious God and merciful...”

A Friendly, Inclusive and Welcoming Church!

Amen.