Sunday April 28, 1974

"INCLUSIVE OR EXCLUSIVE?" Acts 10:24-28, Galatians 3:26-28

Not long ago, I overheard a discussion in which the member of an exclusive club was defending the club's policy of limiting its membership to white Anglo-Saxon Protestants with the proper background. "We want to be free to choose our associates in the club," the person said, "and we think that this freedom of choice belongs with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

It may be quite legal for a private club or organization to limit its members to red-haired men with one leg or to persons who claim their forefathers and mothers came over on the Mayflower. It is our privilege to be as silly or as exclusive or as narrow as we like. But we are mistaken if we call this freedom of choice or freedom of association. It is the exact opposite of these.

When a club or group or neighborhood abitrarily limits its membership to one kind of person, it is denying itself freedom, rather than granting it. It is cutting off from possible membership all those who--despite their high personal qualifications--do not have red-hair, one leg, or relatives who came over on the Mayflower.

The members of an exclusive club or group or neighborhood have actually voted away their freedom of choice. Not matter how much they may like and respect a person named Steinberg or Shaughnessy, they cannot associate with that person in the intimacy of the club setting. They might invite an Einstein to talk to the group, but never to join it. This is one reason exclusive clubs or neighborhoods are so infernally dull. Sameness inevitably leads to boredom!

Yet many of us as individuals and many organizations have a tendency to exclusiveness and there's a deeper issue involved. Whether to be exclusive or inclusive in our lives? That's a question we all face and it's an important one for those of us who call ourselves Christians.

In fact, one of the first decisions the early Christian Church had to make was whether it was going to be exclusive or inclusive.

In the scripture lesson this morning from the Book of Acts, Peter, as the result of a vision, had come to the conclusion

that the church was meant by God to be inclusive. "God has shown me," he reported, "that I should not call any man common or unclean."

The church at Galatia, as well as in other places, had to face the same issue. There were some who kept insisting that only if a person first became a Jew and followed all the Jewish rules, that only then could a person become a Christian.

The main reason Paul wrote to the church in Galatia, was to remind them that the church is to be inclusive and that we are as Christians to be inclusive persons in all our living. Paul reminds the Galatians--"In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

The Jewish religion had in Paul's time become quite exclusive. And now Paul was sure that the new Israel, the church was to be inclusive.

It's an age old problem. The crime that seems to accompany all great ideas is that the possessors of those ideas get possessive about them. The Jews in Paul's time had become possessive of their profound ideas about God. And now some parts of the Christian church were also slipping into an exclusiveness. Thus Paul tells them again that there is one human race and we are all apart of it. God's church is to be inclusive. This is the big new idea! And it still is.

New ideas are great stuff. You may talk of a round world for a thousand years and they did. You may speak of exploring space in science fiction for a hundred and seventy-five years and we have. We may write of democracy for five-hundred years and it's a great idea; but if somebody takes it seriously, he signs a document subscribed with "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor," as did the signers of the Declaration of Independence. And he may just get shot in a revolution or sail off a map with Columbus. Ideas are great, until you sit down in one and ignite it! Ideas are great until you apply them.

And where is a new big idea to be applied? Where you are! To the problem at hand! So Paul's new human race, his idea of inclusiveness had to be applied right where he was to

the immediate problem. So he used it on Jew-Gentile divisions, and it got him thrown out of half the towns in Asia. In our own time, when some churches and others took the same idea seriously and applied it to black-white relations, they too were thrown out. It's the problem of being specific. When we began to applies ideas specifically, then we are called meddlers. Paul never got into trouble unless he applied his idea locally.

There is a safe way to live with ideas. Never apply them where you are, but only urge others to try them somwhere else. But the church is to be the local application of the big idea of inclusiveness! As a church we have no theological right to set any sort of limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ.

But not only do institutions like the church tend to become exclusive, but also as individuals we have a tendency to be exclusive in our relationship and our attitudes, and when we do so, we are the poorer for it.

What is an exclusionist? It is any person who believes only his own myths. His politics are timeless. His economics are just. His race is pure. His religion is true. His sex is superior. His region most favored. His family the only one.

The persons who is exclusive in his approach to life is motivated by fear and defensiveness. The exclusionist is on guard against anything new or different in the way of people, styles of life, values, ideas, programs, or organizations. He is anti-life because he is afraid. Thus all of his relationships are defensive. He has an inordinate need to be right. He cannot tolerate imperfection in others, in those who are close to him and most of all, in himself. He is unable to cope with mistakes and errors.

The exclusionist categorizes and separates things and people into those he likes and those he does not like. His convictions have turned into prejudices. Worse still, the categories by which he condemns and judges people increase the older he grows. He likes less and less and responds to less and less. His interests become more narrow and self-centered, his prejudices increase, his gods get smaller and smaller and his soul becomes increasingly incapable of feel and expressing compassion.

The exclusionist looks only to the past for reassurance. He dodges the tasks of the present and refuses to look at the challenges of the future. He wants the old times to return because they were the best and yet his evaluation of the past is superficial and incomplete. He sees only what he wants to see. His tolerances are minimal. He has become a hideous caricature of the child that he once was and a denial of all the potentialities that once existed in that child.

What is excluded by the person who is exclusive? He rejects people, especially those of a different race or religion; people who have succeeded or who have creative and strong personalities. He rejects new ideas, values and experiences that he cannot instantly accomodate. He wants to get everyone into the same strait-jacket that he wears.

The person who is exclusive falls prey to all kinds of illusions; illusions of omnipotence, perfectability, rightness and importance. For example, an exclusionist was heard to say in relation to the raising of his children, "If I had it to do over again, I would not change a since concept or method." a horrendous admission that he had learned nothing from the experience of being a parent.

The final result of a life of exclusiveness is usually rigid attitudes, dogmatic opinions, bitterness, hostility, and separation; in short a living death. People who defensively live their lives by the principle of exclusiveness spend their declining years in bitterness, not only unhappy with themselves, but creating unhappiness for all around them. They create a class of citizens known as the living dead--living but unburied.

Where can we find the exclusionists? They can be found in every institution and organization. They can be identified by their insistence on looking solely to the past for their clues as they walk backward into history. Churches are favorite places for them. They use God, and the faith, Their hymns, prayers and good works to build ways behind which they can hide from the challenges of the true community of God and persons.

Now the opposite principle of exclusive is to be inclusive! And this is what the church and Christians are to be. Instead of being on guard and closed to new people, new things, new values, new ideas and change of all kinds; the inclusive persons is open to them and at least gives them consideration.

The inclusive person is interested in the new possibilities htat exist all around him. This does not mean that he is like a blotter that soaks up everything with which it comes in contact. He has his values too, his convictions, and his philosophy of life and believes that life has continuity as well as dis-continuity. He respects the tradition that has produced him, even as he evaluates it. He wants his inclusion of tradition to renew it by making it a basis for a free, yet disciplined exploration of future possibilities.

An inclusive person is inevitably a growing person because he is fed by so many sources outside himself.

Several years ago, two people were discussing the hippie movement. One of them said that the hippies were a disgrace to the human race and a danger to public health and decency, and wrote them off as a complete liability. Obviously his attitude was one of exclusion. The other person said that he found it difficult to accept their style of dress, their way of life, but that beneath all the surface things that he could not approve, he saw that they were representing meanings that were important for people to hear. While he did not approve of their way of making a witness, he nevertheless responded to their emphasis on life and community.

In another case, in handing down a decision in relation to violence on a campus, a judge spoke inclusively in relation to the right of anyone to hold any opinion and the freedom to express it wherever he could, but he denied them the right to act in ways that would interfere with the freedom of others and threaten their safety. In the latter part of his statement, he was practicing the exclusion of an inclusionist.

By being inclusive persons is the only way in which we can achieve wholeness. No one can be whole by himself. My meanings are all that I have, but I do not have the whole meaning about anything. But when I seek to include your meanings in mine, and you seek to include my meanings in yours, we have each taken a step toward wholeness. No one person has a corner on the truth, and no one institution or group of people has a corner on the truth.

The whole of Jesus' life was an act of inclusion. Whereas many of the religious people of his time were setting up categories by which to exclude others, he included people of all kinds and particularly those who were rejected by others.

He not only included them, but affirmed them as human beings and led them from where they were to where they would be. His life ended in a death which he offered on behalf of all people, an act of inclusion extended even to those who excluded him. As a result of this inclusion, there was manifest on the face of the earth a power for living that cannot be measured, and which as yet has not been fully realized by many of us. But to be a follower of Jesus Christ is to be an inclusive type person.

God calls us all to be inclusive human beings, and calls this church and all churches to be inclusive institutions. It's one of the marks of the church. This means very specifically being able to see and accept all people as persons and as being more than Americans, or males, or females, or black or white or Indian. This does not mean we deny those qualities and attributes but that we include them as being part of that unique person.

Too many of us live locked tightly within our partial loyalities and thus never realize what the fullness of a human being should be like. We approach the world and people sideways, like a crab, seeing it only from the oblique angle of our particular social status or race or native background, or our special vocation.

But to be a distinctively Christian and inclusive human being, means not to have a worm's eye view or a crab's eye view. It means to share with God a panoramic view of the world, including oneself; it means rising above the accidental prison of our personalities and trying to discover the joy of being inclusive human beings. So this week as you meet new persons and new opportunities and those persons and things you have already put into categories--try to see them fresh and ask yourself--"am I being inclusive or exclusive in my approach and response?"