Sunday April 24, 1983

"INCLUSIVE OR EXCLUSIVE?"

Acts 10:24-28
Galatians 3:26-28
John 10:14-16

It's a delight to be here this morning. I've especially appreciated the friendship of your pastor, Donn Rosenauer, since he's come to Lincoln. Even before meeting Donn, Lutheran pastors have been among my closest friends. In another city some years ago where I was pastor of a congregation, it so happened that I was part of a golf foursome in which the other three individuals were Lutheran pastors -- one a Missouri Synod pastor, another from the LCA, and the third from the ALC. We always had a good time together, and there was a lot of kidding that went on among us. I had had an opportunity to visit all three of the Lutheran churches at one time or another, and thus I kept inviting the three Lutheran pastors to visit the church I served some Sunday morning. Our main worship service was at a time when they were free.

One Sunday morning, to my surprise, after the worship service had begun and the church was filled, I noticed that my three colleagues had come into the sanctuary. Unfortunately, every seat was filled. Quickly, and as quietly as possible, I whispered to the lay assistant who was helping with the worship service that morning, "Three chairs for the Lutherans. He didn't understand what I was saying, as I could tell from the puzzled look on his face. So again I whispered, a little louder, "Three chairs for the Lutherans." Again he signaled that he didn't understand, so I whispered a little louder, "Three chairs for the Lutherans!" Then he seemed to understand, although he looked even more puzzled by the request, so he whispered back, "When? Where?" And I said, "Here! Now!" So with a surprised look on his face, he walked to the front and center of the church and said, "Let's have three cheers for the Lutherans!"

It is good to have our two choirs sing together and for us to sing together and to get better acquainted with each other's traditions and ways of worship. Too often we Christians spend time arguing with one another as to who is the most religious. I once heard a Lutheran and a Congregationalist arguing with each other as to

which was the most religious. Finally the Lutheran said to his friend, "I'll bet you five dollars that you can't even say the Lord's Prayer." His friend replied, "Okay, I'll take that bet." And then he began to recite, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." "Well, I'll be darned," said the Lutheran. "Here's your five dollars. I didn't think you could do it!"

In one of his tall tales, Mark Twain tells how exercised he had become about the considerable amount of discord among God's creatures and how he had decided to take the matter in hand.

> *So I built a cage, and in it I put a dog and a cat. And after a little training I got the dog and cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds, and a monkey. And, after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such successes that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim from Turkestan, and a Buddhist from China, along with a Baptist missionary that I captured on the same trip. And in a very short while there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage.*

This story, as we are painfully aware, continues in many places and in many ways to be true. Tragic confrontations and collisions -- religious, political, and ideological -- persist in destroying human relationships. It's in the news every day. Much of human history seems to be the history of violent conflict. It is one of the terrible ironies of history that religion has been among the primary sources of this conflict. While religious beliefs have been offered as the true basis for harmony and salvation, both here and in the hereafter, they have served equally well as the basis for alienation, hostility, and destruction. Holy cities become justifications for the most unholy sentiments and atrocities. The gracious word of God becomes a vehicle for dispensing grace to ourselves and damnation to those who disagree with us.

And the very cross that symbolizes love, mercy, and forgiveness has so easily been transformed into a banner under which to parade into battle, and a crusading sword for smiting heretics and crucifying "infidels." The

foot of the cross, in fact, has proven to be one of the best places to fight.

We human beings, in other words, always have a tendency to want to be exclusive, instead of inclusive.

We forget that 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, the apostle Peter, as the result of a vision, had come to the conclusion that the church of Jesus Christ was meant by God to be inclusive. "God has shown me," he reported, "that I should not call any person common or unclean." That was a radically new idea!

The church at Galatia, as well as in other places in the first century, 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 ritual laws, that only then could that individual become a true Christian. We've changed it a little today. Now we hear groups saying that only if an individual becomes a certain kind of a Baptist or a certain kind of Lutheran, or a certain kind of something, then and then only can that person become a true Christian and be accepted by God. It's the same wrong argument using different terms.

One of the main reasons Paul wrote his letter 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 in all of our living. Paul reminded the Galatians, "In Christ Jesus you are all children 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." Today we could translate, "There is neither Lutheran nor Roman Catholic, Baptist or United Church of Christ, for we are all one in Christ Jesus."

It's an age-old problem and not limited to religion. 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. So Paul has to remind them that there

is one human race, and we are all part of it. God's church is to be inclusive!

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 relationships and in our attitudes, and when we do so, we are the poorer for it.

What are exclusionists? They are people who believe only in their own myths. Their politics are timeless. Their economics are just. Their race is pure. Their religion is the only one with all the truth. Their sex is superior. Their family the only one.

The persons who are exclusive in their approach to life are motivated by fear and defensiveness. The exclusionists are on guard against anything new or different in the way of people, values, ideas, programs, or organizations. They have an inordinate need to be right. They cannot tolerate imperfection in others. They are unable to cope with mistakes and errors.

The exclusionists reject people, especially those of a different race or different religion. They want to get everyone into the same strait jacket they wear.

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 those around them.

We are all exclusionists at times -- particularly when we quickly jump to conclusions about others, without testing our assumptions.

A woman was on a tea break. She decided to read a magazine and have a cup of tea and eat a snack. She ordered and the waitress brought a cup of tea and a sack of cookies. She opened her purse and took out a magazine.

As she read, a strange man joined her at her table. She continued to read, and they did not speak. Suddenly she was aware that the man had reached into the sack of cookies and had taken one and proceeded to eat the cookie with great gusto. She glared at him and took a cookie herself. He glared at her.

Coldly they eyed each other. Defiantly, he reached out and took another cookie. She was furious. Her face flushed with anger. Blood pressure rose at the impudence of this stranger. He advanced his hand one more time and took another cookie. Coldly, he awaited her response. She was livid. Jaw set, eyes unblinking, she stretched forth her hand and took another cookie. He watched her take and eat the cookie with a fixed stare.

One cookie remained. The man reached for it, picked it up, snapped it neatly in half, and offered half of the last cookie to her. She was outraged and shook her head vigorously in a negative response to his offer. He shrugged and ate the whole cookie himself. Whereupon he got up and left the room.

The woman's day was ruined. She could not believe the uncouth manners, the blatant greed, the territorial encroachment of some people. With an abiding fury, she opened her purse to put away the magazine and leave the room herself. Her heart skipped a beat as she put the magazine in her purse, for there safely tucked inside was the bag of cookies she purchased. She must have put them in when she took out the magazine, and he must've placed his cookies on the table as she read her magazine. She dashed from the room to seek the strange man to confess, apologize, and make restitution, but he was out of sight, never to be seen again.

Be careful when jumping to conclusions until you have all the facts. I recently read of two first-time railroad passengers who had just opened their lunch boxes when the train entered a long, dark tunnel. "Have you tried your sandwich yet?" one asked. "No, why?" said the other. "Don't touch it! I took one bite and went blind."

The opposite of exclusive is to be inclusive. As Jesus said in our gospel lesson for this morning, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold." Instead of always being on guard and always afraid of new people,

new ideas, the inclusive person is open and will at least give them consideration.

This does not mean that the inclusive person is like a blotter that soaks up everything and stands for nothing. Those who are inclusive have values, convictions, and a philosophy of life, and they believe that life has continuity, as well as discontinuity. They also know that no one person or institution has a corner on the truth.

True religious faith is inclusive, not exclusive; it always seeks to enlarge the human spirit and not suppress or confine, or narrow it. Just recently a man came to me and said that some years ago when he was a teenager and had lots of questions and doubts and was seeking and searching, he had gone to his pastor, a man he liked. But when he told his pastor his doubts and questions, the pastor said simply, "You think too much. You must suppress your doubts, forget your questions, and simply have faith."

This man was shaken by this advice. Didn't God give him a mind and an inquisitive spirit? Good religion does not suppress or coerce or confine the human spirit; it enlarges it.

The ecumenical spirit which we celebrate today and last Sunday with our coming and going to each other's churches is for the purpose of helping us be more inclusive, of enlarging our understanding and spirit. We are saying that God speaks in a number of ways and that our religious faith can be expressed differently, but it is the same God. Our mistake is to think that we can fence God into our own little systems and creeds.

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. "Come unto me, all you that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

The life of Jesus ended in a death which he offered on behalf of all people, an act of inclusion extended even to those who excluded him. And as a result of his death and resurrection, there is manifest on this earth a power for living that cannot be measured and

which gives us the power to be inclusive and loving people.

Today we celebrate together the joy of an inclusive faith. Amen.