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The gift of “the other”  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
March 26, 2023  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:1-6, 7, 32-44

What is Rev Paul on about now. What is this gift of “the other”? Who is “the other” anyway? I’m glad you asked. But you already know that I do not have an answer for you. And moreover, you already know that I am going to tell you that you already know the answer.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s pretend that we do not know who “the other” is. Where do we start. According to my new best friend ChatGPT, “ ‘The other’ is a concept used in sociology, psychology, and philosophy to describe individuals or groups who are perceived as different or alien to the dominant culture or group. It can refer to anyone who is seen as different from oneself in terms of ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, sexuality, or any other characteristic that marks them as ‘not like us’.”  
[image: 2 chickens across the road from each other]

So “the other” is anyone that we judge differently - and let’s be honest, usually negatively - because they are different from us. And we freely do this completely ignoring the fact that to the other person, we ourselves are the ones who are different.  
[image: chicken motives]

“Otherism” is an umbrella term that includes all forms of discrimination, including but not limited to: sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, ageism, classism, and many other artificial barriers we create in order to make ourselves feel better.

In other words, “otherism” is moronic. Period. It is defective thinking. Period. It leads to toxic behaviours. Period. Do we still have to talk about this? Yes. Period. According to Paul Shepherd, “ ‘Otherism’ seems like a fundamental flaw in human nature that Christianity has not been effective to counter. If Christianity cannot do better at countering otherism, perhaps Christianity is not worth holding on to. The ultimate test of any religion is how it deals with otherism - in practice, not just in theory.” [Evolving

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Christianity pg 87.]

To be honest, I really cannot tell if otherism is my favourite theme or my least favourite theme.

On the one hand, it must be my favourite theme. Because I seem to have some passion for inclusion. Lack of inclusion in the church is what propelled my to write and publish “Evolving Christianity” in 2020.

[shameless plug for my book ... hey, someone has to pay for my Tesla, it might as well be you]

On the other hand, otherism is perhaps my least favourite theme. Because it is so hard to create a message that is meaningful. It is hard to create a message that does not lead to me be accused of virtue signalling. I can state flatly that otherism is wrong and we all need to just grow up. .... I can and do state flatly that lack of inclusion in the church, and in Christianity in general, is deeply embarrassing and not very Christian. But stating those facts does not seem to lead to much change. I hope and pray for the day that we can stop talking about otherism altogether because there is no longer anyone we look down on.

But I dream.

Otherism is woven into the fabric of traditional Christianity. But we can change. We can evolve. We can do better.

[image: nietzsche]

Consider our reading from Ezekiel. The great story about dry bones coming to life. On the surface the story is about new life. New flesh growing on old bones. From the reading, “there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them” But did you ever ask what colour that skin was? This skin that covered the formerly dry bones. Did that skin represent the global population? Was this new life more diverse than the former life? Or was that new skin a re-statement of a racist ideology?

The story as written is about a view of “god” as racist. A narrow-minded “god” who believes in the racist ideology that there are “chosen people”. And please do not think that I am criticizing Jewish people here. Traditional Christianity completely

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absorbed the concept of “chosen people” for themselves, to the detriment of many of God’s children.

[image: ducks]

Now I can hear your criticisms of me from here. You are going to tell me that we are not so closed-minded today. Today we live in a much more pluralistic society. Today we welcome people regardless of religious persuasion. Right? And yes, I do honestly think that the world we live in today is more open and accepting to all. No, we are not perfect by any means. But I think we have moved somewhat beyond the tribal thinking that is baked into the Bible.

[image: rudolph]

Or not. Let’s do a little test right now. Let’s sing a song that you all know by heart. Trevor - hit it!

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer Has a very shiny nose And if you ever saw it  
You would even say it glows. All of the other reindeers Used to laugh and call him names  
They never let poor Rudolph Join in any reindeer games

Then one foggy Christmas Eve, Santa came to say, Rudolph with your nose so  
bright, Won't you guide my sleigh tonight?

Then all the reindeer's loved him, As they shouted out with glee, Rudolph the  
red-nose Reindeer You'll go down in history!

When that song was created in 1939, that was likely seen as a message of inclusion. Rudolph is initially shunned, and then later becomes loved. That’s what inclusions is all about, right?

Well maybe in 1939. But I find the song - today - highly offensive. Because Rudolph is not loved because he is a unique individual. He (and of course since the reindeer have antlers at Christmas, they are actually all female) is “loved” because he is useful. Rudolph is only loved AFTER he turns out to be useful. That’s not what inclusion is about.

Incidentally, that is why I no longer do Black History Month the way it has been traditionally done in churches. I prefer to open conversation about our own responses to learning black history. The traditional church way to celebrate Black History Month is to

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lift up stories of black people who did useful things. The traditional way to celebrate Black History Month is to say that we should care about black people because they are useful to us. Like Rudolph.

I prefer to celebrate people simply because they are. Not because they have utility for me.

Here's a question. How far does your own openness go. This week I participated in a Summit put on by the Brantford Immigration Partnership (as you may know, Sydenham-Heritage United Church is one of the founding members of that Partnership). I learned many things. One phrase I learned was this:

[image: Diversity is counting numbers. Inclusion is making those numbers count.]

Diversity is counting numbers. Inclusion is making those numbers count. What do you think of that idea? In the church, we are not always terrible at counting the heads of those who do not look like us. But do we live into that? Do we make those numbers - and those relationships - really count?

Think about Thanksgiving Dinner. We all love Thanksgiving Dinner, right? And many of us open our table to people who are alone and have no family. Well, good for you. But there are different levels of openness we might strive for at a Thanksgiving meal.

- Level 1: We host our traditional Thanksgiving Dinner as we have for years. And we invite some people to join us who have no family to share a meal with. We control everything. Our guests have no say in the menu or any aspect of the meal. And we expect them to be appreciative of the wonderful gift we are giving them. Essentially, we include them by inviting them to be just like us.
- Level 2: We host our traditional meal, but we ask our guest for any food preferences they have. We accommodate their food requirements within the traditional meal we have prepared. But only they get the chickpea salad or whatever it is that they need. They are included but like a bad-fitting prosthetic.
- Level 3: We broaden our vision of a Thanksgiving Dinner to include many foods that our guests enjoy. We still make all the food ourselves. We keep total control of

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the event. But we welcome menu suggestions. And everyone at the table gets to enjoy that delicious chickpea salad.

- Level 4: We invite our guests to bring foods that they have prepared themselves to express themselves at our wonderful diverse meal. We are not controlling things. We are not really the host any more. Instead, we facilitate an open, shared, wonderful meal. We invite people to celebrate who they are. We all celebrate - together.
- There are probably other levels. How far to you want to take this inclusion thing?

What level do you think this congregation is at? What level do we aim for?

And there is one point I want to highlight on this Thanksgiving Dinner spectrum. Levels 1 to 4 demonstrate increasing inclusion and participation by all. At the same time, Levels 1 to 4 require decreasing our own sense of control. If we are committed to controlling everything, there is very little scope to be inclusive. We can control things. Or we can be inclusive. We cannot be both at the same time. Again, where is this congregation on that spectrum. And where to we want to be? Are we busy trying to control everything. Or are we open to the unknown, the unexpected, the unforgettable, the glorious.

The Thanksgiving Dinner model has 4 levels. I actually prefer a more simple 3 level model.

[image: diversity -> inclusion -> belonging]

One way I hear this expressed is:

- Diversity is having a seat at the table.
- Inclusion is having a voice.
- Belonging is having that voice be heard.

And I prefer this model because it leads to something even better than inclusion, which is “belonging”.

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I hope this does not seem too theoretical. I want to share two local stories to put some flesh on these bones. And as we reflect on these stories, think of including and belonging.

As you may know, Norm Greenfield and I are both members of the Brantford Community Advisory Board on Homelessness. The Advisory board's role is to advise the city on policies and spending around homelessness initiatives. Many of the members of the Advisory Board are deeply involved in important, practical aspects of homelessness, including housing, food, education, drugs, employment, and emergencies services. Now I should not speak for Norm - and I won't - but in my opinion Norm and I are valuable on that Advisory Board. But not because we are working on those very practical and important issues. We are valuable because we keep lifting up the voices of people experiencing homelessness as individual people. Particularly the need for people living with homelessness to find a sense of dignity in their lives. The need for people living with homelessness to be in relationship with people they can trust. The need to simply have a listening ear. The need to have a relationship with someone who is not trying to get something for themselves at the same time. The need - if we are blunt - to have a friend. The need - if we are blunt - to belong.

In conversation this week - after one of our bi-monthly CAB meetings - Norm and I reflected on some basic mathematics. There are about 300 people experiencing homelessness registered in Brantford. And other people who are not willing to be registered. So let's say there are 500 people in Brantford experiencing homelessness or living with very fragile housing. And Brantford has about 100,000 residents.

So what might Brantford look like if 500 Brantford residents each took an interest - and developed a friendship - with 1 single person experiencing homelessness. Surely there are at least 500 people in Brantford willing to do that. Not to invite a person into your home necessarily. But to act as friends. Which might be as simple as meeting and sharing a meal on a regular basis. To share your life. To listen. To care. There is massive power in telling someone that you will see them next week and then you actually show up. That demonstrates caring. That demonstrates that the other person matters to you. That demonstrates that both parties in the relationship matter. That demonstrates belonging.

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I know a person who has taken that challenge to heart. They selected a single person and have been meeting that person on a regular basis for some time now. It's a beautiful thing. There is no hidden agenda. There are no expectations. There is simply relationship. Caring. There may be a developing friendship. I am certain that both of the people in that relationship are finding connection, healing, and a greater sense of belonging. Imagine what Brantford would feel like when you walk down the street if more of us cared for a single person. Imagine it. Then go do it.

[image: grapefruit]

The gift of “the other” might initially be that we feel better about ourselves by helping “those people”. But over time, the broader and more meaningful gift is that we are in relationship together with another human being. The person we initially try to help will probably feel a better sense of belonging. But I can guarantee that if you reach out to help one of those 500 people ... you will certainly feel a better sense of belonging yourself. You will feel less afraid to go downtown in broad daylight.

That is what community looks like. That is what healing looks like. Healing is being liberated from our fear and other hangups. In our gospel reading today Jesus heals Lazarus. And the last line of the story is this, “Jesus said to the people, unbind Lazarus and let him go”. Unbind him.

Do you want to be unbound? Do you want to be free? Throw away your sense of “us” and “them” and you will be on a new path towards your own freedom. Embrace the gift of the other ... wherever you find it.

Amen.