
The gift of “the other”
Chapel in the Park United Church
March 22, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 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 yourself.

But I’m getting way ahead of myself. So let’s imagine that we do not know who “the other” is. Where do we start? What does the term “The Other” even mean? “ ‘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’.”

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.

That’s why I love the cartoon about the 2 chickens that are on opposite sides of a road.

[image: 2 chickens across the road - how do I get to the other side]

One chicken says, “How do I get to the other side of the road?” And the second chicken responds,

[image: 2 chickens across the road - you are already on the other side]

“You are already on the other side of the road”. Every time you think of someone as “other”, remember that they may be thinking the exact same thing about you.

[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 stupid. Period. It is not thoughtful. Period. It leads to toxic behaviours. Period. Do we still have to talk about this in 2026? Yes. Period.

[image: book and quote]

As I said in my book, *Evolving Christianity*, “The ultimate test of any religion is how it deals with otherism - in practice, not just in theory.”¹ Otherism is important. And sadly, it is still important today.

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

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

On the other hand, otherism is perhaps my least favourite topic. Because it is so hard to create a message that is meaningful. It is hard to make a pitch that impacts people. It is hard to create a message that does not lead to me being 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 we no longer look down on anyone. Perhaps we will - finally - see “the other” as a gift.

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

[image: ducks]

Now I can hear your criticisms from here. You are going to tell me that we are not so closed-minded today. Look around this congregation - we are quite a colourful mix of people, right? Well, that is true. And I for one celebrate that fact. Moreover, 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

¹ *Evolving Christianity* pg 87.

open and accepting to all. We are not perfect by any means. But I think we have moved beyond tribal thinking in important ways.

Actually - we can do a little test right now. Who here knows the song “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer”.

[image: rudolph]

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 accepted into the group.
That's what inclusions is all about, right?

Well maybe in 1939. But I find the song - today - quite offensive. For one thing,
Rudolph cannot be a “he”. Male reindeer lose their antlers in the fall. Since this is a
Christmas song and since the reindeer all have antlers - they are all female.

But the bigger problem for me is that Rudolph is not loved because she is a
unique individual. She is only loved and welcomed because she is useful. She has utility.
Her glowing red nose is just the thing for seeing through the fog. She was first shunned
because she was different. Now she is embraced because her difference is something that
Santa and the other reindeer now need. But she was not embraced just for being herself.

And I suppose in 1939 that is what inclusion looked like. But today I believe that
inclusion is about accepting other people as they are because we are all a gift to each
other. But not because we bring a particular ability. Simply because of who we are.

Incidentally, that is why I no longer celebrate 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 was to 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 the black women who did a lot of mathematics behind the scenes that contributed in important ways to the moon landings. They were useful - like Rudolph.

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

I feel that this reflection is ok, but it's been a bit too theoretical. And I should be honest enough to say more. In Canada we have a problem that when we discuss racism, we sometimes do it in ways that are actually racist. This happens in lots of ways, but today I want to lift up one particular dynamic.

[image: definitions islamophobia and antisemitism]

Just a reminder. Islamophobia is hating a Muslim because they are a Muslim. Antisemitism is hating a Jew because they are a Jew. Islamophobia and antisemitism are the exact same disease. They just impact different communities.

But in Canada, while antisemitism is instantly spoken against - as it should be. Islamophobia is still socially acceptable. Our approach to fighting racism is racist.

As one glaring example, US congressman Randy Fine recently declared that "Muslims do not belong in America". And he is still in office. What do you think would have happened if Fine had said that "Jews do not belong in America". He would have been removed instantly. Antisemitism is taken seriously - and it should be. But Islamophobia is largely given a free pass.

I wanted to warm up with a US example because - to be honest - I'm still very angry about a recent Canadian example. Because just last week, our Premier Doug Ford felt free to spew hate-filled comments at our Muslim brothers and sisters.

If you missed it, Ford made a 3 minute video that was allegedly about fighting hatred. And I applaud that because hatred is stupid and harmful. But during the video Ford make hateful comments himself. The video was timed to coincide with the Al-Quds rally that happened last Saturday, on March 14.

Ford said. "This demonstration is nothing more than a breeding ground for hate and antisemitism. It glorifies violence. It celebrates terrorism. It has no place in Ontario.

It has no place in Canada”.

[image: rabbis]

I participated in the Al-Quds Day event myself, as I have done on previous years. Absolutely nothing hateful or antisemitic was spoken that I heard. The speeches were inspirational and were only focused on reducing hatred and bringing more peace into our world.

There were Jews present - in support of the Al-Quds Day rally. As well as rabbis. The gathering did not promote antisemitism or hatred in any way. Our mainstream media did not cover any of that. What I could find on mainstream media only covered the clash between demonstrator and counter-protesters. The media did not want to cover Muslims being reasonable people and good citizens who oppose an illegal war and an illegal occupation.

In fact, one of the chants at the rally specifically lifted up support for Jews. The chant was:

- Leader: Judaism!
- Crowd: Yes!
- Leader: Zionism!
- Crowd: No!

In Canada, we confront racism in ways that are racist! Islamophobia is the same disease as antisemitism. They both must be fought against equally. And if you do not know the difference between Judaism and Zionism, please reach out to me.

Incidentally, I wrote to Doug Ford to express essentially what I just shared with you. And I suggested he come to the Al-Quds Day event next year and listen. I even offered to escort him into the event. I'm happy to go with any of you next year too.

[image: belonging]

I'd like us to reflect on just how open we are. As individuals, as a congregation, and as a society. What are we open to. What are we - if we are honest - not open to. I look forward to stimulating discussion at our Lenten Group this week. Or anytime actually.

A while ago I participated in an Immigration Summit. And I learned many things. One phrase I learned was this:

Diversity is counting numbers. Inclusion is making those numbers count. What do you think of that idea? Do we treat everybody like they are a gift? Do we make the numbers - and the relationships - count?

[image: thanksgiving dinner]

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 around. 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 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 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?

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 every detail, 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. Where is this congregation on that spectrum. And where do 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”. It is wonderful to be included. But it is life-changing to know that you belong.

[image: grapefruit]

If you ever reach out to a person you might be tempted to call “the other” that person may feel a greater sense of belonging. But I guarantee to you yourself will definitely feel a greater sense of belonging. Because you will realize that your fear of the other person was unfounded. That other person is not the enemy. They are a friend you have not yet met. And when we truly embrace another person, we will find that they are a gift. They may be a gift we actually need.

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.

Amen.