

October 15, 2017 – Full Inclusion Sunday

TEXT: James 3:13–18

TITLE: Living the Good Life

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Imagine you are in a large group of people—maybe twice as large as the people gathered here for worship—and you all agree on everything. Everything. You have full unity on how to live together, how to respect one another, how to care for the planet and for those with special needs in your group. By God’s grace and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, you are totally unified. If that were the case, my work here would be done. On Sunday mornings you’d hear the world’s shortest sermons. (Don’t get your hopes up...)

Now, imagine you are in a large group of people and everyone agrees on everything except for one person. One person has a different opinion about things—maybe a small thing, maybe a big thing. We’ll call this person Mr. X. What would you do with Mr. X? Would you try to change his mind? Would you sit him down and explain how his position was wrong—make him sit through lectures about the errors of his ways—convince him that he is greatly outnumbered and should get in line with the majority? It would be hard simply to let Mr. X hold his opinions if everyone else held a different view. It would likely cause everyone else to feel uncomfortable (Why isn’t he like us?), anxious (Can I trust my kids around him?), and perhaps even mean-spirited (Things would be perfect if Mr. X weren’t here.)

A recent book written about the history of the printing press starts with these two sentences: *The printing press has recorded and spread some of the greatest achievements of humankind. But remember, humankind is also full of idiots.*¹ How often do we handle disagreements by creating two categories: one for the people with whom we agree, the folks who are part of the greatest achievements of humankind, and one for all the idiots—the people with whom we disagree? In our earlier scenario, imagine being part of the majority and looking at Mr. X with disdain since he refuses to come over to our side and so must obviously an idiot.

What happens if there is more than one Mr. X in our large group? What if 10% are Mr. X’s—or 25%—or 49%? And worse, what if this minority position happens to have some advantage over us, the majority people? What if they have more money than us, drive better cars than us, work fewer hours than us? Would we even try to find unanimity for our group? Would we strive for an ideal of peace and mutual respect or simply give up and live within our own group of the larger population: the great achievement folks vs. the idiots?

Unless you’ve been in a cave for the past months in America, you recognize the social dynamics I’ve been describing. Sociologists have long been intrigued by the patterns of human behavior in which there are competing groups—dominant people and dominated people—and their lives so often lead to war and violence

even though peaceful cooperation would be better for everyone involved. Biologists have studied other species, like chimps and monkeys, to see if such traits are unavoidable and simply part of our human genetic make-up. A Dutch biologist named Fran de Waal took two Capuchin monkeys from a family group and placed them side-by-side in cages. He gave them a simple task—hand over a small rock and they'd get a slice of cucumber as a reward. When both monkeys got the same reward, they'd happily hand over the rocks 25x in a row and eat their cucumber slices without a fuss. But as soon as one monkey got cucumber but the other monkey got a sweet, juicy grape, the first monkey quickly handed over its rock—and when it was handed a cucumber slice, it looked at it and literally threw it back at the research assistant. That monkey then threw a fit—slapping the floor with its hand, rattling the cage bars, clearly angry and bitter about the inequity in this experiment. Interestingly enough, after a while, having seen how its colleague was behaving, the second monkey in some cases would refuse to accept the grape reward until the first monkey was also given one. What does that tell us about our primal tendencies for aggression as well as how fairness is perhaps hard-wired within us, if we could learn to trust those instincts instead?

We do not live in a world in which there is total unanimity. There are multiple Mr. X's in our midst—just as it also true that for some people, we are the Mr. X's, the outliers and difficult ones. This Sunday has been designated Full Inclusion Sunday. We recognize the value of inclusion and diversity, especially as it relates to gender identity. We acknowledge that this viewpoint is not universally held nor fully legally safeguarded. As people of faith, we are committed to protect the shared rights of lesbians, gays, bisexual, and transgendered American citizens in their workplaces and homes, in the military, in every state as well as in countries overseas. Hopefully this church will always be a safe place to discuss the topic of full inclusion and where both LGBTQ individuals and their allies will find common ground to talk, worship and pray together.

Yet even as we recognize a spirit of like-mindedness here on the topic of diversity, the book of James still speaks directly to us and to our American context today. James 3: *Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth [for they lead to] disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.* James equates living a good life with being wise and understanding. Yet he recognizes there is worldly wisdom and heavenly wisdom—a wisdom that is manifest in our earthly behaviors, our genetic impulses, our tendencies to denigrate and distance ourselves from those with whom we disagree vs. a wisdom that comes from above, from Christ and the Holy Spirit, a spirit of gentleness and peace.

James is not waxing philosophical here. He is being extremely concrete and direct. He is worried about the tendency of people of faith to fall victim to bitterness and division. James speaks against threats to full inclusion within the body of Christ—whether that involves people who would keep us out for reasons of race, economics, gender identity, or nationality, or our inclination to keep others out, for reasons of politics, education, geography, or denomination. James knows there will always be Mr. X's in our midst. The question is: What do we do with these people? Yes, sometimes we will protest—ideally always non-violently. Sometimes we will push for political change and legal safeguards. Sometimes we will write letters and make our opinions heard. But James reminds us we must only do so in ways that are wise and understanding, that are pure and peaceable, that are guided by mercy and seeking good fruits for all concerned.

This approach is not aggressive at all. It recognizes that restraint is just as much a part of wisdom as advocacy and action. A young adult in Chicago recently wrote this prayer for their worship at Lake View Presbyterian Church, and it goes like this: *Almighty God, you are the restful night. You are the count to ten. You are the draft we write and do not send. You are the nameless, tireless diplomat. You are the safety net. We pray for peace for all and for ourselves until only jokes bomb, only batters strike, and only cameras shoot.*²

Remember: There will always be Mr. X's in our lives. They will be in our church, our workplace, our neighborhood, and our country. They will disagree with us and perhaps even provoke us to feel bitterness, perhaps envy, perhaps anger. In their eyes, we are the Mr. X's. We represent the “other,” the opposing vote, the contrary voice. It's true that these differences appear to be part of the human story—as old as the bible, as ingrained as our monkey brains and evolutionary chromosomes. Yet how do we respond and live good lives that bear good fruits?

The first step is to seek wisdom from above. Believe that God is a God of peace; that Christ who lived, taught, died and was resurrected, is in the midst of our every conversation; and that the Spirit of grace and truth blows all around us, pushing us toward places where life is lived on earth as it is in heaven. To be receptive to this wisdom from above requires restraint—a restraining of our imperfect human wisdom and of our too often antagonistic, violent inclinations towards those with whom we disagree. It requires us to count to ten, to write drafts we do not send, to work tirelessly behind the scenes for the well-being of all, and to pray for peace. Second, this wisdom invites us to sow seeds now for a future harvest of righteousness soon to come. We may not pick the fruits of peace and harmony and justice and full inclusion. But perhaps we will taste some of these things and glimpse some of these goals. James assures us: *A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.* That a key part of the wisdom from above.

I just finished a book by Sean Carroll called The Big Picture. He is a scientist and an atheist—not an aggressive one; by his own admission, simply a lapsed

Episcopalian who chooses now to look at all of life as biologically determined. There are many things on which I disagree with him and would argue with him as a Mr. X in my world of faith. But in his last paragraph, Sean wrote these words: *All lives are different and some face hardships that others will never know. But we all share the same universe, the same laws of nature, and the same task of [caring] for ourselves and those around us in the brief amount of time we have in the world. [We each have] three billion heartbeats. The clock is ticking.*³

As opposed to Mr. Carroll, I include God in the equation of life. I see Christ as the one who allows me to sympathetically recognize that yes, all lives are different and many face hardships that I will never know. And I trust the Holy Spirit to move me and you, and all the Mr. and Ms. X, Y and Zs, so that together we can sow in peace the things that lead to a harvest of righteousness. I believe with that gentle wisdom from above, we can lead a good life. Truly.

¹ J.P and Rebecca Romney, Printer's Error: Irreverent Stories from Book History.

² Benno Nelson, Lake View Presbyterian Church, 2017.

³ Sean Carroll, The Big Picture, p. 433.