

## Exclusion/Inclusion

*Pentecost 4C—June 12, 2016*

*[This transcript was meant for a spoken performance. It is not optimized for a reading experience.]*

*Jesus took his place at the table. A woman came in, who had a bad name in the town. She had heard Jesus was dining with the Pharisee and had brought with her an alabaster jar of ointment.*

Will you pray with me? The Holy calls to draw the circle wide and wider still. May we awaken to that great call. Open us so that we might become more aware. Amen. May this be so!

I was absolutely positive that my life plan was unfolding as it should. I knew what my life would be. I had been called. I had been chosen. I had begun.

The beginning began with me giving away my worldly possessions. I should point out that this great wisdom and certainty of knowing was at the age of 18. At 18, I prepared and entered a monastic community.

For those here this morning who are Roman Catholic, you have an understanding of religious orders and monasteries. Monasteries are communities of men or women who dedicate their lives to God. Monks and/or nuns renounced the world as they had known and entered into a new reality.

Christians have been gathering, renouncing and dedicating their lives in segregation from very early in the emerging Christian movement. The Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers are some of the earliest communities that date back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

One of the most influential leaders of Christian monasticism emerged in the sixth century. That figure was an Italian monk by the name of San Benedetto da Norcia. You might have heard of him. He is St Benedict.

Benedict is significant to the emerging and rapidly developing Christian church in the early medieval time because his work, his teaching and his writings became a cornerstone to almost every community that formed following Benedict.

Benedict created form and function. Benedict taught and invited others to experience God in the rhythm and the ritual of prayer. That experiment became the “Rule of St. Benedict.”

What Benedict experimented with, way back then, is experienced here and now in religious communities. You just need to go over to O’Connor Drive where it meets Broadview and you will see the new communal building, the convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph. Within those walls, the ancient rhythm and rituals are observed. Nuns gather morning, noon, evening and night to chant, to pray and to be mindful of their calling to this ancient sacred way of following Jesus.

What Benedict laid out was a challenge to embrace the rhythm of the day. That was lived out by dedicating one's life to the community.

The Rule of St. Benedict is the precept of how a dedicated religious is to live. The Benedictine rule demanded religious—that is monks and nuns—follow the rule of *Ora et Labora*, prayer and work. Every day, followers observed 8 hours in prayer, 8 hours in sleep and 8 hours manual work or sacred reading or works of charity.

Benedict influence is the foundation of all religious communities in Western Christianity.

*Ora et Labora*. I was divesting myself of my assets in preparation of entering a monastery. I had been called and I had accepted to live life as a monk in a Franciscan monastery.

When I say my assets, I am talking about my most valued possessions. I gave away my records. Yes even my beloved, well-worn Janis Joplin LPs.

Then there were my clothes. My clothes. My bell bottoms, the plaid ones I mentioned a few weeks ago. My lace shirts. I gave them all away. My world, or at least my attire, became literally black and white.

Like I said, my life path was laid out before me. The challenge was for me to figure out how to fit in. Fantasy and reality became two very different experiences.

I forget how many new men arrived the year I entered. Maybe there were a dozen men. The monastery was a huge, huge old estate.

The postulants (that was me and the other new guys) were not the only ones living on the estate. There were also the monks who had spent their adult life in the order. Many were retired. Some were infirm.

Although we were all a part of the same order and the same community, we were kept very separate. We prayed separate and we worked separately. Our *ora* was different from their *ora* and our *labora* was most certainly separate from the elderly's.

As soon as I entered the doors of the monastery, I had this loud monkey chatter in my head screaming, "What in God's name have you done... Run!" "Run out the door." "Run back to the airport." "Run back to Canada." I was in Pennsylvania.

This was my life plan. This is what I was called to be. This is what I was called to do.

I just had to figure out how to fit in. I was determined to fit in. I wanted to belong.

I'm from Cambridge, Ontario. Yes, I was born on a farm but I moved to the city when I was two years old. In Cambridge, I had no responsibilities except maybe trim the hedge once in a while. Maybe that is why my mind monkeys were screeching at me. On one level, I had an easy life when it came to work.

Do you know how much land is on a gigantic estate? A lot. On some sunny weekend day, I don't know when, after our morning *ora* it was time to do *labora*, meaning we had to go out and work. We had to go out and do manual work.

What I remember of that day was that there were bushes, trees, some monks and an old beat up pickup truck. I cannot forget the hill. There was a hill. So —bushes, monks and a hill, then someone asks, "does anyone know how to drive a pickup truck?"

What on earth was I thinking? Obviously I wasn't. That didn't stop me from volunteering to drive the old beat-up truck for this work. We cut, chopped and threw the stuff in the back of the truck. I got in the cab. I think Brother Joseph was riding shotgun. The other monks hopped in the back on top of crap we had picked up.

The truck was at the end of the path. The path was on the hill. My job was simple. Take the debris up the hill and over to wherever it was supposed to go.

Easy-peasy. I can do that. Now you are missing a piece of information that all the other monks also didn't have. *I didn't know how to drive!*

Oh, come on, how hard is it to drive a truck? Turn the key, put your foot on the gas and go. I turned the key. I pushed the pedal and the engine roared. The pickup didn't move. The monk riding shotgun said, "you have to put it in gear".

Not only did I not know how to drive a truck—I didn't know how to drive a truck with a stick shift. But how hard could that be?

Push down on that other pedal that is not the gas and is not the brake, move the stick ... nothing but a grinding sound. One more time, other pedal, move stick and gun it. It worked.

The pickup lurched forward. The monks screamed. Some flew off and disappeared off the back.

Remember, it's a hill. I got the truck moving only to discover I couldn't get it to go faster.

The pickup, the debris and the last remaining monks slowly ... very slowly ... chugged up the hill, slower and slower until we almost reached the top. I pushed the gas harder. (I told you it was easy-peasy.) I was driving a truck! My first pickup truck! A stick shift, no less!

Just as we were about to breach the hill, the old pickup stalled. When the truck stalled, it followed the laws of gravity and—you can guess what happened. The truck began to roll backwards. Back down the hill. Monks who had been ejected earlier scrambled to get out of the way of the out-of-control vehicle. The monks still in the back were trapped because the blessed truck went off the path and began crashing through the brush and trees.

I really want to say that this was all made up ... but it wasn't. I want to say that I learned my lesson ... but I didn't.

Remember that monk that was riding shotgun with me? Sometime, some day later, he said he wanted to get a haircut. The monastery was essentially in the outback of the wilds of Pennsylvania. The monastery had a barber shop. Well, at least it had a barber's chair and a pair of scissors.

Connect the dots. Oh, come on, how hard can it be to cut hair? I told Joseph that I could cut his hair and I did. His hair looked beautiful, in a very abstract, weird kind of way. Joseph took the mirror to look at his new coif and screamed. I guess he didn't go for the avant-garde look. If you connected the dots and determined that I didn't know how to cut hair, you would be correct. Let me tell you what you probably already know: hair is really hard to cut.

That monkey chatter that I had when I first entered the monastery that told me to run, I should have listened to. I struggled deeply with being caught in the polarity of wanting to belong, wanting to fit in and not belonging, not fitting. I wanted to be included and I battled with exclusion.

Today's gospel from the storyteller we call Luke is a tale of the polarities of inclusion and exclusion.

This is the third story of inclusion that we have recently read. The storyteller is writing to their community. The storyteller is crafting a message about who Jesus was and who Jesus is.

There is another deeper level that the storyteller wants the listener to tap into. That was true then and there; this is true here and now.

This is a story of exclusion:

*Jesus arrived at the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table, a woman came in, who had a bad name in the town. She had heard Jesus was dining with the Pharisee and had brought with her an alabaster jar of ointment.*

This is a story of inclusion:

*When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw this, the Pharisee said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who this woman is who is touching him and what a bad name she has." Then Jesus took him up, "Simon, I have something to say to you." (The Jesus of Luke goes on to teach through the use of parable.)*

This is a story of exclusion. This is a story of inclusion. This is a story about me. This is a story about you.

Going deeper still: this is a teaching, a story about community. Specifically, this is a story about late first-century Christian community. This is a story about late 21st-century Christian community. This is a teaching for the Lucan community of followers. This is a teaching for the Kimbourne Park United Church community of followers.

St. Benedict shaped and impacted Christian faith communities from the six century, right through to today.

Benedict invited and challenged his followers to experience a Christian life that experimented with the balance of *Ora et Labora*, Prayer and Work.

Next Sunday, you and I are invited to an experiment of Prayer and Work. We are calling the experiment Action Sunday.

I have to confess that my mind monkeys have been very active in the past couple of weeks. They are chattering about this experiment of Action Sunday. One keeps shrieking that this is crazy. It's not going to work. Nobody will come and that is about us here.

When I can quiet the monkeys, something deep within me stirs and says come, follow.

With today's gospel in mind, how wonderfully appropriate that we are about to launch this experiment that centres around a meal?

This experiment is about inclusion and exclusion. This experiment will allow us to experience how we include one another and how we exclude one another and, again, I am talking about you and me as a community, a congregation.

How will we honour, celebrate and include our elders? On the other end, how will we honour, celebrate and include even our youngest in this congregation?

This experiment will provide an experience of unity and solidarity one with another, shoulder to shoulder, and hand in hand.

This experiment will provide us an opportunity of working together, the *Labora* that Benedict taught.

This experiment is an experience of labour and we will experience drawing our circle wide and wider still.

The task or tool of the experiment is the work of charity. Unlike our Christmas Goodie sale, this experiment is an opportunity to use that positive co-operation that we have experienced and to channel or direct it into work, for no other reason than we do this because this is the sacred ancient way of caring for others.

If we are fortunate next weekend, we will share space with those who are in need. We are a congregation that has aligned itself with a mission and commitment to food justice.

We will feed people and, to use what Suzanne said a couple of weeks ago, because this is what we are called to do from the gospels: to feed the hungry.

Today's gospel is teaching about the experience of God through the ways Jesus Christ. Read the gospel over again this week.

Who are you in the gospel? Read the story again; who are you now? Read and sit with the gospel and place yourself in the story as each and every figure. Be Simon the Pharisee. Be the woman with the Bad Name. Be Jesus, Be the Divine. We are all of the parts.

We are all of the parts and we want to belong.  
*We are all of the parts and we want to belong.*

We want to be included. We want to be seen.  
Keep this in mind when we begin the experiment next week.

Are you willing?

Are you able?

Draw the circle wide. Feel the uncertainty,

Draw it wider still. Feel the tightness,

Draw it wider.

“I can't work with her.” Draw it wide.

“I don't want to sit next to him.” Draw it wider still.

When I was 18, I was absolutely positive that my life plan was unfolding as it should. I knew what my life would be. I had been called. I had been chosen. I had begun.

At 59, I have absolutely no idea what my life plan is. What I do know for sure is that life is an experience. Life is an experience, not a certainty. Step into the experience. Be a part of the experiment because this is good news indeed.