

NOTHING SHOULD SEPARATE US FROM GOD'S FAMILY

The Church has not always been either helpful or consistent about one of its bedrock claims. The claim is that God loves each and every person. That's great news to some and a surprise to others! In reality that isn't the whole story. Depending on which denomination or independent church we attend there may be many rules, expectations and doctrines that we must accept before we are encouraged to believe that God already loves us--just as we are!

I've worshiped in churches where the message frequently dwelt on sin. Often the sins of the world "out there" were targeted. On other occasions the focus seemed to be us "in here" (i.e. in the congregation) as sinners. We learned that our only way to escape the "fires of hell" as the consequence of our sins was to accept that we were helpless. We needed to believe that it was only the blood of Jesus that "washed away" our sins. Joining some of these churches might not be an option for those who could not affirm these teachings about sin and Jesus.

However, sometimes the less conservative or even liberal groups went to the opposite extreme. They were reluctant to talk about the reality of sin and personal accountability. It was as if sin was simply not a concern. Instead, we were challenged to go forth and do good. Questions about whether God wanted us to serve God in a particular way were not welcomed. We were expected to believe that if we meant well in whatever way we tried to help people, even though we didn't pray for guidance first, then God would or should be pleased.

A third type of Christian community minimizes or even dismisses any emphasis on doctrines or beliefs. This kind of church may deemphasize the Bible as God's Word and instead read it as literature, history or myth. Holy Communion may be described either as The Lord's Supper or as a time of remembering the "Last Supper" that Jesus shared with his disciples. They may or may not welcome people with well thought out positions on matters of faith and morals particularly if the new person's beliefs don't agree with those of the congregation.

While living in Vermont I often led worship for pastors who were away on Sunday. One church in which I was asked to lead worship seemed incredibly distant from Christianity as I understand it. How distant? They did not even have a cross anywhere in the church building.

Along with not welcoming people who are not like "us," congregations may actively exclude people who don't fit into their idea of what a good member is. These churches effectively erect and maintain barriers that separate some members of the family of God from other members of the family of God. It's as if they feel at some level the need to protect those who are considered acceptable ("us") from those who are not welcome in their local church or denomination ("them").

I use the terms "them" and "us"¹ because they point to a socially constructed myth that God makes some people better or more deserving than others. The other socially constructed myth is that those of us who manage to believe and even to live as a church demands are somehow more loved by God than those who don't measure up. That is simply wrong! The people who are treated as "less worthy than" others may be treated as outsiders ("them")

¹ My use of the words "us" and "them" as socially-constructed realities" (i.e. not inherent in human nature) is based on a private conversation with The Rev. Dr. Alan Jones at Campbell UMC, Campbell, CA around 2009-2011.

simply because of their skin color, sexual orientation, education, wealth or family history. The reality is that many of God's very loved people want first to be accepted "just as we are." That should be obvious, but the Church doesn't always recognize the obvious. People cannot become what they are called to become until they are accepted for who they are.

Sadly, we continue to develop more criteria for determining whether someone will "fit" into our congregations. We often exclude people who are not like "us." We may do it consciously or unconsciously. It happens when we don't invite them into the fellowship as well as the various ministries of the congregation. It also happens when we ignore their absence and never inquire about why they have not been active in the church lately.

For the present I will suggest a few readings from the Bible that might help those who would like to broaden the definition of "us" and narrow or eliminate the use of the term "them."²

1. The Beatitudes ([Matthew 5:1-12](#)) as reminders of who God wants to bless.
2. [Matthew 5:43-48](#) ("Love your enemies . . .").
3. ". . . for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ([Galatians 3:28](#))
4. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God. ([Ephesians 2:19](#))
5. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. ([Genesis 1:31](#))

The bottom line is that nothing and no one should distance or exclude us from God or from being recognized as a member of God's family.

As always, I am open to your responses.

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² I believe, but did not ask, that this was the intent of The Rev. Dr. Alan Jones' comment as noted in footnote # 1.