

INCLUSION & EXCLUSION

Galatians 1: 1-10; 2:19-20, 3: 26-29

People come to Canada as refugees for all kinds of reasons. Some of you here are refugee claimants and you have good reasons to be seeking asylum in Canada. Your ultimate goal is citizenship, but the most immediate goal is protection. Today, I want to talk about refugees that come to Canada seeking protection from harm specifically because their sexuality or their queer gender identity make them targets of hate and violence in their countries of birth.

Biko Beuttah grew up in Kenya. Here's how they describe their journey. Growing up, I had no reference to any kind of sexuality that wasn't heteronormative. It was hard to understand what it meant to be trans because there was no language for it, and there were no trans people out in the open. I travelled to the U.S. for college and during Halloween, I dressed up like a woman. For the first time, I finally felt like I was in my own skin. I knew I couldn't go back to Kenya, where I would be killed for being trans, so I applied for asylum in Canada in 2006. I still experience transphobia here in Canada, just like every trans person anywhere in the world. At the end of the day, no matter where you live, there's still fear and anxiety."

LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers face discrimination worldwide. They find barriers to employment, education, safe housing, legal status, and health care. In about 70 countries same-sex relations are criminalized and, in six countries, punishable by death. Many LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers have endured years of exclusion, discrimination, and even violence by family, community, and authorities before being forced to flee home.

Once in countries of asylum, they are at a heightened risk of gender-based violence and often live for years in legal limbo, waiting on decisions from adjudicators who don't know that refugee status may be granted based on sexual orientation or queer gender identity. Living without recognized status increases their risk of targeted violence and exploitation.

Our ARISE ministry works with exploited women in the sex-trade and a disproportionate number of them would identify as LGBTQ and have become vulnerable to exploitation because of their queer identity.

Isn't all this awful? Here's another story. Dalia grew up on the Island of St. Lucia. Here's what she says: "I didn't really know what sexuality was when I was younger – there was no language for it. I began to feel like I was a lesbian around the age of 10. Most of the time I was learning about it on my own because I didn't know who to trust or who to tell. I eventually decided to leave St. Lucia because I realized my family would never accept me and I wouldn't be able to live a new life. I arrived in Canada in 2005, and my family doesn't talk to me anymore. I am married to a woman I met in Toronto, who is also a refugee from St. Lucia."

Finally, there is Nouran from Egypt. “I met my partner on Instagram while I was living in Egypt. When I was in college, my family looked through my phone and found messages between us. They couldn’t accept it, and they beat me. They even admitted me to a mental health hospital for a week. My partner and I knew we were in danger and so we escaped. We hid around Egypt until we could finally get a visa to leave as refugees, thanks to the support of the Rainbow Railroad, an organization that helps LGBTQ people escape state-sponsored violence. We came to Toronto in June 2018. When we first arrived, we were so happy that we cried. We both received refugee status and are currently applying for our permanent residency. Neither of us have relationships with our families.”

Isn’t all this so sad? And yet it’s so real. Last December we gave a gift of \$5000 to an organization based in Toronto called: The 519, if some of you remember. This money was directed to their refugee support program which is the biggest program they run and the biggest one of its kind in Canada. Thousands of LGBTQ refugees are supported with everything from their refugee process to housing, groceries and mental health support too. The need is great and we at Armour Heights have been part of that support.

But let’s zero in, now, on a deeper theological theme. There is much talk about inclusion and exclusion when it comes to persons who are different than the majority because of their queer identity. And while we may think that inclusion is a good word and exclusion a bad one, we would be naïve if we didn’t also understand that for people to feel safe, sometimes we do have to exclude those attitudes, ideas, perspectives and even persons who are not safe. And to help us discern where we draw the line, let’s seek out some revelatory guidance from our scriptures. And in this regard, there’s no one better dealing with the themes of inclusion and exclusion than the apostle Paul.

Paul’s world was a world where everyone had a place and a status based on an identity those on top decided fit you. Were you identified as a man, a woman or an in-between eunuch? Were you Roman by birth or one of the conquered peoples? Were you rich or poor? Were you free or enslaved? What family were you from? Race, gender, social status, all of it was a pecking order and honour or shame was based on whether you stayed in your lane and behaved with due respect and submission to those above you in status.

Unfortunately, this also functioned with Paul’s own people - the Jews. If you were Jewish in the Roman world you were down at the bottom, but if you were Jewish in the Jewish world you were at the top. As a minority people Jews had to associate with gentiles for business and basic living, but you kept that to a minimum. You didn’t contaminate yourself by touching each other, eating together or, god forbid, intermarrying.

But the revelation of Jesus to Paul totally changed his heart and his perspective on all this 180 degrees. For Paul, the revelation of Jesus was about all people coming together and becoming siblings not in blood and culture, but in heart and spirit. But to become truly siblings, siblings in Christ, what binds you together, namely love, must be greater than anything that separates you in terms of social status, race or gender.

It's one thing to be different. All our differences that make us the unique human beings we are, are gifts of God to be cherished and celebrated. No. It's the differences that become reasons to separate, divide and treat each other differently that are the problem. I may be black, brown or white, straight or queer, man, woman or somewhere in-between. That's part of the rich diversity of creation. God makes no mistakes that way. The problem is sin in human society where people use differences to treat each other differently. One group wants to dominate another group and even enslave them. They will use guilt and shame, physical force and violence and even religious laws to do this. They will call you sick, or flawed or cursed because you're not like them.

OK, the world is the world and God's people are God's people. But what happens when God's people get confused? What happens when leaders within the church start talking difference as a reason to judge those who are different and pressure them to become more like them, keep women submissive and condemn anyone who behaves and loves differently as not fully part of Christ's body?

Let's zero in on our scriptures. Paul is writing to the Christians of a region in current day Turkey called Galatia. And the primary reason for the letter is that Paul is super angry. Other Christian leaders, mainly Jews like Paul, have come in and told them that God's love does not include everyone the same. If you're a Jew you are part of the special people of God. If you're a non-Jew, you are flawed if not excluded. In order to be included in God's love fully, you have to become Jewish yourself in terms of your cultural and religious practices. There is one right way to be a Christian and it has to be the Jewish way.

According to Paul, this is not only wrong, but it reflects the Jewish version of all that is wrong with the world. Here's what he says: Grace to you and peace from Abba God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age..." In other words, our sins of judging differences as reasons to treat people differently put Jesus on the cross because he didn't live according to such norms and laws. But rather than condemn his people for such sins, Jesus offered forgiveness from the cross as a doorway to becoming free once and for all from the present evil age that excludes people who are different.

But Paul says more: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one (namely: Paul) who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of

Christ. But even if an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!" Wow! Strong exclusionary language, dear Paul. You really are angry! But is this a positive way to deal with your enemies? Does Paul really want his opponents within the church accursed? No. What Paul is fired up about is the harm they're causing vulnerable people in the church - non-Jews who are new Christians and who will respect Jewish Christian authorities who come in and tell them they're doing their Christianity all wrong. Paul has no tolerance for such harm being committed. He calls for them to be excluded from Christ's body because they are contaminating it with racism and hate towards those who are different.

So what is it that Paul truly believes then? Here's what he tells the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." In other words I have died to an old way of life in society and synagogue/church, where differences are reasons to treat people differently and judge them for being who they are. I have been crucified to that and have risen up into a new way of being in Christ, through his love. My new identity in Christ is the core of who I am now, and the uniqueness that makes me who I am in the world is not to be condemned but celebrated because Christ has loved me and even died because he refused to love me any less for being the unique human I am. Isn't this a powerful way to hear Paul's words?

But there's more. Paul also says this: "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's and Sarah's offspring, heirs according to the promise." In other words, just because you are not a Jew by blood, it doesn't mean you are any less a part of the family, full heirs inheriting all the love and the destiny that come with belonging to Christ. You are included, you are loved and you belong fully to Christ's family as siblings and as children of God's own heart.

Isn't this gorgeous? And yet, sadly, in order to include people who are different in the family of God's love, we have to exclude those persons and perspectives that are exclusionary, racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic. Sure we must try to open space for discussion and listening. But we must also create safe space for people to be and spaces where they know those around them will love them. There is no middle ground here, and Paul knows that. The question is: will all people come on board the inclusion train?

At General Assembly of the Presbyterian church this year, there was a ruling that made some people feel excluded. Because our church has now accepted that candidates for ordination in our church as ministers and elders can be queer-identifying, other clergy and elders who oppose such inclusion can no longer openly express their opposition. That has made them feel

excluded. Every person is free in their conscience to believe and to reject whatever they wish. But they cannot do so openly in the courts of our church. The doctrine of our church has now made space fully for inclusion of LGBTQ persons as 100% equal. People are excluded when they reject that God's love includes everyone as God created them to be. To create a safe and welcome space for all people, we must sometimes exclude those attitudes and even persons sadly, who cannot treat people equally and accept the uniqueness of who God created them to be. What do you think?

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for creating us all with such rich diversity of being. Expand our love always to include others by learning how to cherish their uniqueness and making them feel welcome and safe with us. Help those who cannot be so inclusive. And help us discern when we must exclude in order to create safe and welcoming space for your inclusive love... Amen.