

Innies and Outies

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, when we hear some part of the tenth chapter of John about Jesus the Good Shepherd. Some years we hear the part about Jesus telling us he is the Good Shepherd. Some years, like this one, we hear this more difficult passage that Mimi just read. And so, for this other side of Good Shepherd Sunday, I'd like to begin by imparting to all of you an immensely profound truth. It is this: All human beings have a belly button. At first upon hearing that you might want to snicker, or even guffaw. Go ahead. You're probably thinking – why, every little four-year old knows THAT! Perhaps you think I've lost my marbles. But bear with me while I explain why this is so important.

First of all, there is no other body part that is so universally human. Most people have noses, but there are exceptions. Same thing for ears, and eyes, and arms, and even brains. People are born with various birth defects, or lose these parts due to disease or injury. Not so with the belly button. If you were born, you have one.

Secondly, the belly button is the reminder of your initial human state – connection. For the initial and most formative period of your life, while you were in the womb, you were physically attached to your mother by the umbilical cord. Through that cord came all your nourishment and

sustenance. Out of that cord went all the dangerous waste products. After your birth the physical cord was cut, and when the site healed it became your belly button. But even though the literal physical attachment was cut, you did not cease to need your mother. Every four-year old knows THAT.

But belly buttons also show us something else that seems to be universal among humans. From a very early age, we like to separate ourselves into categories. You can find four-year olds in their play groups lifting up their shirts and comparing their belly buttons. (They like to compare other body parts too but we won't go there today). Are you an innie or an outie? When you're four years old, it seems like a fun game. When it's four-year-olds saying it, it can seem pretty cute.

The problem is, the "innies and outies" game doesn't end with four-year-olds or belly buttons. As we grow older, it goes on to other categories of division. Us and them. Black and white. Haves and have-nots. Gay and straight. Liberal and conservative. Good guys and bad guys. And as grown-ups continue to play these other versions of the belly button game, the phrase "innies and outies" takes on a much more sinister meaning.

Religion, unfortunately, has been a major player in this ongoing and very serious human game. Christianity, in spite of its gospel of love, has often seemed more prone to judgment and exclusion than to welcome the

stranger. Consider today's reading from John's gospel. This portion is a part of the beloved "Good Shepherd" passage, but it points to the other side of the story. Those who listen to Jesus and follow him belong to his flock, and are assured eternal life. The others, who do not belong, will presumably perish. They are the outies, who will be literally outside when God closes the gates in the final kingdom of paradise.

In this case the outies are named by the gospel writer. They are "the Jews." The irony here is, of course, that Jesus and all the other disciples were also Jews. How do we account for this? In the time when John's gospel was written, there was a fierce division going on within the Jewish community. The followers of Jesus, who were Jews, could not fathom why their brethren did not accept Jesus as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Those who did not believe in Jesus could not fathom those who DID believe, and began ousting his followers from their synagogues. It was the period when Christianity was separating itself from its Jewish roots, a time of great torment and upheaval in the Jewish community that gave birth to the fledgling church. Both groups felt the necessity of distinguishing themselves from the other. Both spoke and wrote vindictively about the other. The cord that bound them together was cut. But each was marked by the reminder of their previous relationship. Their love had turned to fear. And so when

Christians look for biblical texts to prove the damnation of the Jews, it is most often in the gospel of John where they find them.

This game of innies and outies between Christians and Jews is as old as the church, and it includes some of the sorriest chapters of Christian history. Of course Christian claims of exclusivity are not limited to Jews. Countless volumes have been written and theologies expounded, attempting to make the number of those saved smaller and smaller. There was Calvin, with his doctrines of predestination and double election: “Not all are created on equal terms, but some are pre-ordained to eternal life, and others to eternal damnation...” There were Arminians and supralapsarians, who designed their own complicated theological systems of salvation that began with free grace for all, but posited doctrinal roadblocks along a narrowing and steepening path. There was the Inquisition, infamous for the cruelty and injustice of its judgments. Even today, you don’t have to go far to encounter the narrowest definition of salvation among those who claim to be followers of Jesus. Last year right here in Philadelphia Fred Phelps’ church picketed with their hateful and hate-filled signs declaring “God hates fags.” And when I looked up today’s passage from John on the Internet, a site called “The Bible Lighthouse” informed me: “We can clearly show from Scripture that God does not desire the salvation of all people.”

Like belly buttons, this desire to separate and exclude is a universal human trait. It is born of fear. Fear of scarcity. There may not be enough pie to go around – food pie, money pie, land pie, love pie, God pie. And there is plenty of this fear reflected in the Bible. Fear can be a powerful motivator of human behavior. But in our Bible there is also something else reflected. There is also plenty of love and abundance. In this very same chapter of John, just a few verses earlier, Jesus says this: “I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.” So which Shepherd do we listen to? The one who says the Jews can never belong to the sheep? Or the one who desires that there will be one flock under one loving Shepherd?

When interpreting and studying Scripture, one principle that I find helpful is that of the larger context. Anyone can find a verse of Scripture that seems to support or refute almost any position. But each verse, each passage needs also to be held up against the larger meaning of the whole of Scripture. And when we read all of it together, it seems to me that the overwhelming message of the Gospel is love. It is inclusion. It is connection. It is our need for God, and our need for one another. “Don’t be afraid” is Jesus’ most frequent saying in the gospels. And in John? I don’t

know for sure, but I wouldn't be surprised to find out that it is "Love one another."

I do not claim to know the mind of God, and I instantly mistrust anyone who has the arrogance to say he does. But it seems to me that we Christians have a choice. We can look to what unites us to others, or what separates us. We can err on the side of love, or of fear. We can wear ourselves out arguing about who's in and who's out, poking around under one another's shirts, metaphorically speaking, to find out. Or, we can marvel at the mark we all bear – the mark of our universal connection – the sign that every one of us was created and nurtured and birthed in love. WE are more alike than we are different. WE are all the sheep of one Shepherd, who knows us each by name. We are all the beloved children of one God. And every four year old knows THAT.

Amen