

Them to Us

The quest for true inclusion

John Botha, Willows Methodist Church

Preamble

Throughout this document, I enclose text in boxes indicate projected slides. Text which was spoken by the congregation is underlined, as it was in yellow on the slides themselves.

Let us stand.

Welcome and declaration

The grace of The Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

And also with you.

The risen Christ is with us!

Praise the Lord!

Please turn around and greet your fellow worshippers. You can catch up with them (or introduce yourselves!) after the service over a cup of tea or coffee. By then it should be a bit warmer, with the sun shining on the lawn outside. For now, let's find out what else is happening in the life of Willows.

<Notices>

A word of warning: Since today is one of the critical services for my studies, I need to include a lot of liturgy, so while the sermon itself will be quite short on words, it will be long on challenge.

For those who are accessing this via the Internet, you can download a PDF of my notes including the slides and all references from <https://willows.org.za/sermons>. Look for the sermon of 19 June, 2022. Copyright dictates that we cannot include the songs in the recording, but they are referenced in the PDF of the notes, as they are integral to today's message.

Call to worship

Come, let us gather together to worship our Lord: He Whose Word guides us in the way we should go.

We gather to hear from His Word what He has to say to us today.

Call to worship

Come, let us gather together to worship our Lord: He Who alone quenches our eternal thirst through the offering of His Life for us.

We gather to drink from the well of His unending grace.

Call to worship

Come, let us gather together to worship our Lord: He Who sends us into the world to do His Will and Who guides us into all the truth.

We gather to bring our offering of praise and worship to our King.

Call to worship

Come, Holy Spirit!

Amen!

Those are such joyous words! Please be seated, as I read from Scripture. Today's readings from the Lectionary come to four A4 pages when printed, so I shall summarise them, and read a few extracts which speak to today's topic. Here they are, if you'd like to write them down.

Today's lectionary readings

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a

Psalms 42

Psalms 43

Isaiah 65:1-9

Psalms 22:19-28

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

Thereafter we shall respond in musical praise and worship, singing songs which build on the theme, and that shall be followed by the sermon.

The reading from 1 Kings concerns Elijah. He had just been God's agent in the miracle of the fire from Heaven, which completely obliterated the drenched offering, the water, and even the twelve stones of the altar. After that all the people declared 'The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God' and at Elijah's command captured 940 prophets of Baal and Ashera, and Elijah killed them. After that, God heard his plea and broke the drought in its third year (the drought Elijah had declared as God's judgement). This was all in one day, yet after all of that, when the queen threatened him, he ran away and asked God that he may die, after he had gone a day's journey into the wilderness, having left his servant behind.

God provided food for him via an angel and he travelled into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights until he got to mount Horeb, where God revealed Himself to Elijah in the well-known episode of God being in the low whisper and not in the great tumult of the mighty wind, the earthquake, or the fire.

Psalm 42 is the well-known Psalm which speaks of one's soul panting and thirsting for God. It and Psalm 43 both have much more, but I want to quote the last verse of each; they are identical.

Psalm 42:11, 43:5

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him,
my salvation and my God.

In both these psalms, the verse is in the context of looking to the future while acknowledging current hardship, even being oppressed and mocked for faith in God.

In the passage from Isaiah 65, God answers Isaiah's plea for clemency, stating how He was ready to be found by His people, but that they not only turned away from Him, but actively partook in practises which they knew were an abomination to Him. Yet, He speaks blessing on those who do seek Him, on those who serve Him. If you read on past the end of the lectionary reading, it continues to the famous passage where God says that He will create new heavens and a new earth, where the lion and the lamb shall lie together. Note, again, that this is in the future, as is the repayment for evil.

Psalm 22 is one of the Messianic psalms, but today's reading rather looks to God's deliverance, as we see in this extract.

Psalm 22:26,26(a)

For He has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and He has not hidden His face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to Him.

...

The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek Him shall praise The Lord!

The reading from Galatians speaks of our justification by faith in Christ, and how we are no longer under The Law, which here is being likened to a guardian. Instead through Christ we are all seen as sons of God, having 'put on Christ', so to speak. The reading closes at the end of the chapter, but the train of thought continues, and I urge you to go and read it for yourself.

That said, even before I knew I was preaching today I had verse 28 in mind as I was planning the worship. Let's read it.

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

I'll return to this in the main part of the sermon, but let's wrap up looking at today's readings from the lectionary. The final reading relates the miracle of the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac. The accounts are multi-layered, and books have been written about it, but I want to zoom in on the final two verses.

Luke 8:38–39

The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with Him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.'

Luke 8:38–39

And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him.

We have heard *of*, and we have heard *from* The Word of The Lord. Let us respond by bringing Him our praise and worship in song. After the first two songs please remain standing as we declare some of Who God Is, and what He has both done and what He does for us. Then we shall continue in worship, leading up to the sermon. Let us stand as we sing.

Praise and worship

Both services opened with the Afrikaans *Loof God vir Sy Dade [To God be the Glory]*." I was unable to find it on YouTube, so here is a link to the English version. We sang a generally pretty good translation of it, so the English should be fine. <https://youtu.be/1nlw4ql2s14>.

07h30

- [When We Walk With The Lord, vv 1,4,5](#)
- [How Great is Our God](#)
- <Declarations (see below), prayer>
- [The Night Song](#)
- [Mmoloki Warona](#)

09h15

- [Build Your Kingdom Here](#)
- [Lay Me Down](#)
- <Declarations (see below), prayer>
- [How Great is Our God](#)
- [The Night Song](#)
- [Mmoloki Warona](#)

Both services closed with *Let There be Love Shared Among Us*: <https://youtu.be/5mvs6rMjuwc>

Declarations

Let us spend some time declaring Who God Is; as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word.

God is the Creator

The Spirit is Ruach Elohim:
The Wind and Breath of God

His Name is Adonai Elohim:
My Lord, Master, and Provider

God is the Covenant Maker

God is the avenger

His Name is El Elyon:
God Most High

He is my shield, and my great reward

God is The Living One, Who sees me

His Name is El Shaddai:
Almighty, God of Heaven

God is The Judge

He is The Everlasting God

His Name is Adonai Yireh:
God will provide

He is God of dreams

He is The Great I Am

God is my Deliverer and my Redeemer

He is The Shepherd and Overseer of my soul

God is pure

The Lord God is the Alpha and the Omega, Who is and Who was and Who is to come, the Almighty.

Introduction

Prayers: Invocation

Come, O Holy Spirit, and quicken our hearts to hear from You. Please help me to relay what You have placed on my heart. May I not be an impediment and may Your seed find deep, fertile soil here today.

Amen

What are we celebrating today? It is Father's Day! To all the dads here: sorry, but we have no biltong for you. Being resourceful, I am sure you will be able to find some after the service. If you're a vegetarian or a vegan, then I have two words for you: 'smoked tofu.' It is really much better than the non-smoked, and it's even tasty.

As one dad to another, though, I pray that you will pay attention to the message of this sermon and stand out of the way so that The Spirit of God can work in your heart and mind and strength and soul, for that is what you must use to love God, so you can love yourself in order to love others. That brings me to the topic of the sermon.

A few weeks ago I started thinking of the songs of praise and worship for today, as this is the closest Sunday to the 16th of June this year — a date of great significance here in South Africa, and which serves as a backdrop of sorts to this sermon. I say ‘of sorts’, because this is by no means a political sermon. Rather, I want us to consider very seriously what we are called to — and Who it is that does the calling — because at the end of the day *that* is what should be the driving force *in* and the stamp of identity *on* our lives.

Sermon

I was nine years old when it happened; when 16 June became a date of significance in South Africa as a whole and in the consciousness of many people throughout the world. Of course, being nine my understanding of the situation was practically zero, but there were rumours of some very bad things happening. Also, the fabric of our society was changing.

Over time I was being ostracised more and more at school and even at church, because of — as I later found out — my father’s job: head of the Department of Economics at *Wits*. The university of the Witwatersrand was seen as a den of communists and of people who didn’t like Wagner. OK, so I made up the bit about Wagner, but I was called all sorts of things and my parents’ social circle diminished because of these aspersions. Even parts of our family shunned us.

On the other side of the fence the grass was just as brown: we were not welcome in most English-speaking environments because we were Afrikaans, which was taken to mean that at the very least we had to be *verkramp* [politically conservative]. Again, no-one bothered to engage to find out more. Shunning is so much easier.

It was not limited to South Africa and we experienced the same in the UK. In 1979 my father had the opportunity to work with a Nobel prize winner in his field. Early in the year my parents were looking for a church to attend and we enjoyed the service at a particular parish. The priest greeted everyone at the door of the ancient building and asked us where we were from. When my father replied ‘South Africa’, the response was to turn around and immediately engage in an oh-so-friendly-manner with someone else. The deep irony is that it was just up the road from the Martyrs’ Memorial in Oxford, where the Archbishop of Canterbury and two other bishops were burned at the stake in the mid 1500s for being Protestants.

I can mention many other such events — some even being physically violent — but the point is simply that too often we fall back to an ‘us *versus* them’ mentality. I daresay that as Christians we are in the supreme us *versus* them scenario, but the difference is that our goal is to make the circle bigger, and that is why the title of the sermon is:

‘Them’ to ‘Us’:
The quest for true inclusion

Listen carefully to these Scriptures.

‘By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’
— John 13:35

This speaks about all people knowing our status as disciples of Christ, not just other Christians — all people. It almost feels like we should wear our hearts on our sleeves.

‘Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.’
—Romans 13:8

Many translators say that the debt of love is a continuing one, so it is not one which can be repaid as such. We thus need to work at it all the time.

‘For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.’
—Galatians 5:13

This is from just before the lectionary reading from Galatians for today. Note how though it speaks of our freedom, we are not free to indulge our flesh and its appetites, but rather that we should exercise that freedom in serving one another through love. Those under the law are under compulsion and mandated to behave in certain ways. In our case our freedom makes love possible, for it is a choice to serve.

The next we shall look at in a bit more detail.

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.
—2 Corinthians 13:11

This is one of those cases where our English struggles to express the Greek well. Either sex can be referred to here, and the closeness is actually that of twins: not bosom buddies, but womb buddies! This state of closeness has nothing to do with human characteristics, as it depends

entirely on Christ's redemptive work on our behalf. That is what enables us to live in peace and to experience God's presence. It is a result of agreeing with one another, which here seems to flow from a place of comforting one another as well. Note that the Greek also refers to calling someone near and to inviting them in. That seems here to be the result of the first thing we are to do in relation to each other: aiming for restoration. This restoration is to be completed thoroughly, resulting in what was broken being repaired, mended, and restored.

Note one thing, though: *aiming* for restoration means that they were not yet there, and in all honesty, neither are we. Yet, as we read in 2 Corinthians 5:11–21, we are new creations and God has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation so that He makes His appeal through us. More than that, we are His ambassadors here, which is an awesome responsibility, since that means that we represent God! Are we up to the task?

I was going to read Isaiah chapter 58, but we won't have time, so please read it in your own time, thinking about how it is applicable to us, here and now. That's Isaiah chapter 58.

I want to link to the excerpts I highlighted from the lectionary readings, and the rather direct linking Scripture is Matthew 5:43–48, where Jesus challenges us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. Furthermore, we are to love those who do not love us, and greet those who do not greet us.

Having people not greet us, being persecuted, not being loved... all of these lead to a rather dismal situation. When we are at such a point, we can find solace in the Psalms in today's readings. The thing, though, is that we should suffer these things because of His Name's sake, and not because we are being chastised, and that is where keeping Isaiah 65 in mind is very important: there is the promise of deliverance for those who seek and serve The Lord, but going against Him will simply end in disaster.

Moving on, we see in the excerpt from Galatians that we are all equal in God's eyes. The conclusion is that we 'are all one in Christ Jesus.' The two references above to 2 Corinthians are very important, as we are the bearers of the good news of the ministry of reconciliation which God has given us. As we work out our salvation, we get involved in restoration, in comforting one another, agreeing with one another, and living in peace.

Painful experience shows that this is difficult. Not everyone is at the same point of maturity, and often we feel overwhelmed. That is when the case of Elijah can be of help. God had just used him incredibly, but he felt he was unable to continue. We are called to do what Jesus told the man he had freed from the legion of demons: we must declare how much God has done for us.

Conclusion

In all of this, though, the point is to make the circle bigger, to turn ‘them’ into ‘us’. When we approach everyone from the point that we can all be one in Christ, then though it may be difficult to overcome our prejudices, we can attain to this oneness in our daily lives. We can.

This leads nicely into the challenge. When Helen and I started dating in 1987, we were among very, very few couples where one was English and the other Afrikaans. The language in our home is English, and our children grew up speaking it, yet even they experienced discrimination because of other people’s prejudices when they saw the Afrikaans surname.

So here is the challenge: *As a Christian*, reach out to one of your Christian brothers or sisters from a very different culture to your own. I’m going to up the *ante* and say that it should ideally be cross-racial — though we are all actually members of the human race and the differences between us are almost vanishingly small as a percentage of our genetic make-up. I would love for Willows to become a bastion of God’s model of inclusion, of the visible expression of His love at work in our lives.

Only then can we truly expect to be witnesses for Christ as opposed to being (to be brutally honest) rather pathetic apologists trying to engage at the level of mind. I shall conclude with this quote from Theodore Roosevelt:

No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.
—Theodore Roosevelt

The worship team can make their way to the front for the closing song, while we all engage in a prayer liturgy.

Please stand, as this is responsive.

Prayers: Adoration

Dear Lord God, we bow before You in worship. You alone are God and we come to You in reverence.

Prayers: Adoration

We acknowledge that You are the Creator of all there is — You brought all into being and You sustain all through Your great power.

Prayers: Adoration

Accept our expression of love as we declare Your greatness and our complete dependence on You.

Prayers: Confession

O God, we come before You knowing that we fall short of Your glory. Yet we come in full assurance of Your grace, knowing that You love us with an everlasting love.

Prayers: Confession

We confess that we often forget You during our day, that we allow our busyness to drown out Your voice in our lives.

Forgive us, we pray.

Prayers: Forgiveness

You have taught us, God, to forgive others as You have forgiven us. Bring to mind those we need to forgive.

Prayers: Forgiveness

Then help us, merciful Father, to show mercy, to be kind, and to show Your love to those whom we need to forgive.

Prayers: Intercession

Lord, You say that we need to intercede for one another and we bring before you those in need.

Prayers: Intercession

Be merciful to those who have lost jobs, shelter, and even loved ones. May we express to them Your Love as You lead us.

Prayers: Petition

Though You supply our needs, Lord, You also tell us to bring our petitions before You as Your Spirit teaches us how to ask.

Prayers: Petition

Guide us, O God, through Your Spirit, Who helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how we ought to pray.

Prayers: Supplication

God, we pray for the lost, that they may be found. We pray for us, the found, that we may seek the lost.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Silent Reflection

Prayers: Thanksgiving

Thank You, Lord, that You supply our every need: we need not be anxious for anything. Before we speak a word, You know what is on our lips.

Prayers: Thanksgiving

Thank You that You hear us, O Lord.

Thank You that You love us with an everlasting love.

Prayers: Thanksgiving

Thank You, dear Lord, that You work through us even though we fall so far short of Your glory.

Prayers: Praise

Because of all these things we come before You with joy in our hearts and a song of praise on our lips, for You have done great things!

Prayers: Praise

Let us make a joyful noise to God as we praise Him: our Rock and our Salvation!

We shall now sing our closing song, followed by a benediction.

<Closing song>

Benediction: Jude 24–25

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy,

Benediction: Jude 24–25

to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever.
Amen.

Main external references

Strong's numbers: <https://biblehub.com/strongs.htm>