

*Based on Leviticus 19:34 and "I Find the Earring That Broke Loose from My Ear the Night a White Woman Told Me the World Would Save Her" by Ashley M. Jones*

Last week I asked the Session to describe, in their personal experience, what it feels like to be *included*. Their responses were visceral.

When I am included, they said, I feel unconditional love at a cellular level. Everything is breathing and moving as it should, without effort. When I am included, they said, I feel totally known and totally accepted, like I do not have to prove anything, like I do not have to work at being true to myself, like I can be completely authentic, without pretense. When I am included, they said, I feel safe. I can just be. When I am included, they said, We are One.

Feeling *excluded*, on the other hand, is all that in reverse. When I am ex-cluded, they said, everything is uneasy, forced, like way too much work. When I am ex-cluded, they said, I just do not fit, to the point that it almost becomes an out-of-body experience. When I am ex-cluded, they said, there is so much I just do not know, either because it is new or because I am left out or because I am pushed out. And for some of us, they said, we are routinely ex-cluded; the dominant culture just does not work for us - and does not seem to want to try.

In the Church the word *inclusive* has a particular progressive history. For decades, when we Presbyterians were fighting ugly over whether or not the LGBTQIA+ community could be ordained and married in our congregations, *inclusivity* became a code word for those of us seeking to be the church we have finally become. I do not know for sure, but I will venture a guess that the use of the word *inclusive* here did, at least in part, originate with this commitment, even if our understanding of what it means to be truly inclusive has broadened since those days.

And yes, our understanding of what it means to be truly inclusive *has* broadened since those days. Inclusivity at SPC, I have learned, means just about everything we can think of: racial inclusivity, economic inclusivity, national origin inclusivity, religious and spiritual background inclusivity, and on and on, at least in theory. It is far harder to practice, as we know, with political inclusivity being the hardest in this moment of national history.

Part of the challenge - for us and for everyone - is the particular posture of power from which the commitment to inclusivity comes. For congregations firmly rooted in the dominant culture, as we are at SPC, it can be far too easy to proclaim We Choose Welcome - which we do! - while subconsciously adding the subtext: *as long as you adjust to our standards*. Our reading today is one example of the harmful impact when dominant culture claims an inclusivity from a posture of expecting the world to take care of us when, in fact, the world emphatically does not *take care of* the very people we claim we are trying to include.

True inclusivity requires a lot more work, like a jeweler repairing a broken earring, as our poet describes, or a stained glass artist repairing broken shards of glass. True inclusivity requires us to be willing - and even eager -

to submit ourselves to transformation through the ever-widening inclusion of others. True inclusivity requires us to be willing - and even eager - to become an entirely new creation as *quote, unquote* "others" come to include US!

Do you hear the difference there? When we say proudly *we* are willing to include *others*, that means *we* retain the power to ex-clude them, as well. But when we say more humbly that *we submit ourselves to be included BY OTHERS ON THEIR TERMS*, that means we have truly honored the power of the other to lead us all into greater wholeness.

A uniquely challenging commitment to inclusivity here at SPC has emerged these past several years in part *because* so many newcomers have come and adjusted our standards, especially in our staff and lay leadership. We are still trying to figure out how best to include our on-line/hybrid community, as well as families with Sunday morning obligations that keep them away from worship, even as they continue to think of SPC as their church home. So much change has happened at SPC these past several years that sometimes the old-timers can now feel quite ex-cluded, even as the newcomers are not quite sure where they fit, either. In many ways, *all* of us at SPC are newcomers right now, wondering if who SPC is becoming will continue to include us at a cellular level, without effort or pretense, where we can simply Be, safe and One.

Moses is trying to address a similar challenge in our Lesson today, as he prepares the people to live justly and inclusively in a land of promise and plenty. They have made it through the panic of crisis and the euphoria of freedom and now find themselves stopped mid-journey in the middle of the desert for reflection and reorientation. Like us, they are re-discovering their identity in the wake of radical change. In what one biblical scholar describes as *the summit of biblical ethics* Moses insists in this section of Leviticus that they remember their visceral experience of ex-clusion in order to drive their ongoing commitment to inclusion.

The people, in this moment, know full well what it means to be left out, pushed out, and outright oppressed into economic and physical bondage. They are rightly ready to proclaim power for *themselves* after so much powerlessness in the face of the dominant culture. Moses warns them not to let their newfound empowerment go to their heads. Never forget what it was like to be excluded, Moses insists. If you do, you will turn around and exclude others, which is never what God had in mind.

Our Session, too, settled on this kind of wisdom. We can wallow in the truly earth-shattering experience of exclusion. Or we can pray for the power of God to transform that experience into compassion for the excluded other. We become Inclusive Community at SPC, in part, because we know what it is to be ex-cluded.

At the end of the day, though, the truth is that inclusive community is not really up to us at all. It is up to God. Our baptism makes clear: we are, every one of us, *always, already by simply existing* included in the community of all that is, which most emphatically includes that which may feel foreign to us, but is not ever foreign to God. Our baptism also makes clear: we are, every one of us, *always, already by simply existing* included in the steadfast, never failing, never quitting, always with us, universal and unconditional love of God,

which is from everlasting to everlasting. While no individual congregation can ever live up to that inclusion, we absolutely must do our part to approximate it.

When we *do* do our part, here at SPC and everywhere we go, newcomer and old-timer alike, of every diverse type of background we can think to come from, secure in the inclusivity of our baptism, we cannot help, as one body, to breathe and move as we should, totally known and totally accepted, authentically true to ourselves ... and even more importantly, authentically true to God.