

When my kids were younger, I heard a phrase that we quickly adopted in our home: "We don't say You Can't Play." When a sibling or friend wanted to join a group of other kids playing with one another, it was never an option to tell that child that they couldn't play, too. Sometimes conversations needed to be had around playing kindly or setting expectations and parameters for the game so that someone wouldn't come in as a lego-stomping fire-breathing dragon and destroy the city that everyone worked hard to build, but I wanted to communicate the importance of everyone having an opportunity to be included if they desire that.

The very idea of needing to have a phrase to encourage my kids to not leave someone out always really made me concerned for our hearts as humans and where this notion of exclusion comes from. Why is it so natural for us- starting from such a young age- to exclude other people?

This is our whole schtick as humans- we want to protect what we have and keep the outsiders on the outside. We've seen it in our own religious landscape. There are moral codes and rules that should be followed and when someone doesn't follow them, we kick them out of the club, or we don't let them in at all. Or, at our worst, we scapegoat in order to restore peace, which is the ultimate exclusion.

On the opposite side of that coin is our need to belong. We humans have an intrinsic desire to be accepted and supported by other people, and that motivates us to group ourselves with people with whom we share things in common. In fact, in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, belongingness is considered one of the biggest needs that motivates human behavior.

There was a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2017 that looked at 64 babies at the age of right around a year and a half. Researchers ran an experiment where groups of women wore labels to identify them as members of two separate groups. Then the women acted out different social scenarios while the babies watched. The researchers reported that when a situation was acted out where one woman needed help, the babies had an expectation that women from the same group would help her- but there was no such expectation for women who were part of a different group than the woman who needed help.

This suggests that, before the age of 2, we already have expectations about how people will act towards one another based on whether or not they are part of the same group. This might help explain why a person may be quick to assist someone they love, but not feel any pressing need to help someone they see as an "outsider", such as an immigrant or a refugee. The natural tendency to identify and associate with certain groups isn't necessarily a bad thing; this just tells us that we as humans quickly learn to recognize differences in people. But we can easily see how an Us vs. Them mentality

could be adopted if adults in a child's life don't work to model an open, inclusive posture.

I grew up in a racially and socio-economically diverse Ypsilanti, and I feel so grateful to have had the privilege of living life alongside people with vast differences, starting from a young age. I was the only white girl in my close group of high school girlfriends which lent itself to some eye-and-mind-opening experiences. At the music store while we were just a bunch of teenagers trying to buy the new Kris Kross single I witnessed my friends being cautiously watched, or followed, by the store clerk. I didn't get followed. We went to parties where I was the "minority", and then had conversations about how that was different than my friends' daily experiences of not having a choice about whether or not to be in a place where no one looked like them, and they might meet hostility- or worse- at any time. Or the night at a typical weekend sleepover when I grabbed my girlfriend's brush to put my hair up and she laughed and told me I was welcome to try, but that her brush wasn't going to work for my hair texture.

We talked openly about race. We were friends because of our similarities- that's usually what draws people together initially- but we didn't shy away from talking about our differences. And those conversations were what deepened our connections to one another. So my upbringing was a crash course in inclusion and diversity. I made unintentional mistakes then and I still do. As a white, straight, cis-gendered person I benefit from systems that oppress non-white, non-straight, gender-queer people, and perhaps even unintentionally contribute to those systems. So I'm most grateful for those friends who loved me enough to have been patient with me, even though they didn't owe me that. Their love for me gave me the courage to not be afraid of having the hard conversations and also to not get my feelings hurt when they had to correct me.

From start to finish, Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is also a crash course in inclusion and diversity, of bringing the outsider in. It teaches us humans to recognize and move away from our instinct to close ranks, which is an instinct that humans developed as a protective mechanism. The stories in the Bible instead paint a picture of reaching across cultural, racial, religious and philosophical barriers in order to bring in, not push out. After all, heaven expands, widens, envelops.

I think that, high level, we all get that theme. But just like with most things, in practice it's a little more difficult to pull off because we are resisting our very human instincts to close ranks with people who look, think, speak and act like we do. Look at social media as an example. We surround ourselves with people who see life through our lens and end up in an echo chamber where we all validate each other's opinions and ideas and resist anything that looks or sounds like it might be contradictory to our own ideology. But the Bible teaches us to love our enemies, and to take care of the widows and orphans, and to welcome the outsider into our community. And the only way we can do that is to get outside of our echo chamber and get around people who aren't like us.

So while there are many stories with this idea of inclusion running throughout the Bible, I want to focus on this passage in John...

In John 10:14-16, Jesus says:

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”

So I feel like this is the appropriate point in our time together this morning to tell you all that I follow a few sheep on Instagram. And here's why. They are not only absolutely adorable but they are full of personality! Their owners will post little stories about them and there is no one sheep who is like another. Harriet likes to be a ham for the camera, Mariko loves to snuggle and Poppy is a messy eater. It makes my day to see their fluffy little faces come up on my feed- I've developed such an affection for these little guys and gals and I've never even met them! So I can relate on a very small level to what Jesus is saying here.

In the eyes of Jesus, sheep are not anonymous- each one is as individually known as if it had its own Instagram account! And if we are those sheep, he's saying that he knows us just as deeply as he and God know each other.

Then Jesus says that he has “Other sheep not of this sheep pen”. This might refer to Gentiles, or may simply be a reference to other followers who aren't a part of John's community. But he thought it was important enough to be explicit here- that it isn't just about the people gathered around listening. It's about bringing “The Other” in. That they are a part of what God is doing, and that their presence is essential: remember, Jesus said “I must bring them also.” MUST. Not- it's fine if they're included and it's fine if they aren't. It's imperative that they be brought in. He addresses this directly because he knows that we are predisposed to gravitate towards people who are like us, and he wants to make it clear that that's not the way it's gonna be, folks.

What does this say about how we should behave towards people who we see as “Other”? People who are fundamentally different than we are? What if we started viewing their presence in our lives as necessary instead of optional? How would that change the way we interact with our neighbors or even people who we might disagree with?

Because Jesus says that once they're brought in “There will be one flock”. This is better translated as “There will BECOME one flock”. Jesus is not saying that he's going to make all the sheep into one sheep. No- he knows them each individually, and as intimately as he knows God. But he's bringing all of those sheep together- with all of their little personalities and quirks and distinguishing marks- with all of their similarities and all of their differences- and they will together become one flock that is led by the shepherd.

Jesus knows our need to belong, and he also knows our tendency to push people out. So he makes it clear that he is after unity- not uniformity. We will all be brought together as one flock, and we can all be different.

Caroline turned me on to writer and civil rights activist Audrey Lorde, and I love this quote from her: "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences." It's okay to acknowledge that we aren't all the same, not just broadly but on an individual, person-to-person basis. If we pretend that we don't see color, or gender, or disability then we are missing out on learning so much about the people in the periphery of our lives whose experience of life may be very different than ours. Not only that, but in order to fully know and be known we have to first acknowledge that we aren't all the same. We ARE different. And just as I learned with my friends growing up, acknowledging that can create a really powerful bond.

A misguided adage is that of the notion of color-blindness as it relates to skin color. There was a photo circulating online a few years ago of two little boys, one white and one black. The white boy asked his mom if she could cut his hair just like his black friend's hair. The boys were convinced that if they had the same hairstyle, their teacher wouldn't be able to tell them apart, and they thought it would be hilarious to play this joke on her. The commentary from the white mom is that we should all be just like these little boys who see themselves as so much alike that they don't notice the color of one another's skin.

It's so cute that these boys thought that with the same haircut they could fool their teacher. They obviously bonded over their similarities, right? But as adults we ought to realize that the reason that's so adorable is BECAUSE the boys don't look the same. They have very obvious differences in their skin color and that's nothing to skirt around or avoid. So let's not teach color-blindness. Let's not take the lazy way out. Let's not pretend not to see differences. When we do that, especially as white people, we completely invalidate a part of someone's identity and equate skin color as something negative. If we say we don't see someone's race it's like saying, "I see who you are DESPITE the color of your skin," as though skin color is something to be ashamed of.

So what are some things that we can do as teachers, carers, parents, and relatives of little ones to ensure that they learn to bend towards inclusion?

One way is to encourage children to ask questions when they notice something different. Kids are naturally curious and won't always be in close contact with people who look different than they do, so it's up to us as adults to give them the appropriate language to talk about the differences that they notice, and to teach them that it's okay to do so. I recently saw an amazing example of this on the Scary Mommy blog. There was a photo of a woman whose right arm was missing, and this is the story she posted

below, and I'm going to quote the whole thing, because there's a lot of good stuff here that would get lost in paraphrasing, so bear with me:

"Can you tell me the story of how you lost your arm?" he said. "Sure. I was in an accident when I was just 10 years old.", [I replied.] "Oh okay. My mom says it never hurts to ask and asking is better than staring." I bet when you started reading this, you would have never guessed this conversation was with a child. I was taken back (in a good way) too.

So many times children stare and make statements like, "what happened to YOU" or what's WRONG with your arm?" And it's no fault to them, and mostly no fault to their parents, because they're kids. Kids are bold and unpredictable. It never causes me to be upset AT them, but there's always a little sting when that "what's WRONG with your arm" hits my ears and my heart.

But yesterday, when this little boy, (now a new friend of mine) approached me in the way that he did, "tell me the story..." I immediately knew I should do 2 things:

- THANK HIS MOTHER for discussing these situations with her child + congratulate her on her success in actually getting a small human to consider her advice long enough to utilize it.
- SHARE THIS STORY with all of you! He had grace and compassion in his voice. He thought through what he was going to say, before he said it. He approached the topic in a way that gave me a purpose instead of making me feel like an outcast. He listened to my answer and then followed up with validation on why he was asking. Honestly, I got on here to share this story for the parents who (like me) wonder what's the best way to teach our kids how to act/approach those who are "different", but now that I have this all typed out, this post is just as much for ADULTS as it is for kids. We can ALL learn from this 8 year old. Humans are still raising kind humans.

I think it was very kind of this woman to post this story. What a phenomenal example of how okay it is to talk about our differences instead of pretending that they don't exist, and to teach the kids in our lives to do the same.

This is also so great because no two people are alike, and to make assumptions about an entire group of people based on one person's experience is incomplete and unfair. So asking someone about their life and points-of-view and preferences as an individual helps to broaden our kids' perspective in the truly diverse landscape of human experience, instead of encouraging pigeon-holing or stereotyping.

Another way to encourage inclusion is to role play scenarios where someone may feel left out. When kids are encouraged to problem-solve solutions it strengthens the neural pathways in their brains so that they will be more confidently able to think creatively in the future. So instead of telling children how a situation should be handled, you can try asking them what they would do in a similar situation. Or what they would do differently if it wasn't handled in an appropriate way. This helps develop their young brains into

creative, free-thinking brains and over time they will feel more comfortable and confident in decision-making, including as it relates to how to treat other people.

I am in no way a parenting expert. But I have done lots of this kind of role-playing with my own fire-breathing, Lego stomping dragons when less-than-ideal choices are made, or when we hear about upsetting things that have happened in the world. We talk about what happened, how they would feel if it had happened to them, and what could be done differently next time. I don't give them the answers- I wait as long as it takes for them to figure it out. It's always pretty amazing to see what creative solutions they come up with.

And finally, I would suggest modeling the behavior that you want the children in your life to emulate, including them when possible, and discussing it with them. We can talk AT them all day long about doing the right thing but it helps tremendously to see The Right Thing happening around them.

Speak positively about the people in your life. Look for opportunities to include people who may be overlooked or actively left out. Stand with those who are on the outside looking in. And let the kids in your life see you doing that.

I'd like to end with a quote from an article written by Bradley Artson, Dean of Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and Vice President at American Jewish University:

The Bible starts with two profound stories: The first story we are given is of a God who cannot bear to be alone. A God who is driven by love to create a world of flowering and cascading diversity in which nothing is precisely like what came before it; in which each new creature is delightfully fresh and novel; in which God, thrilled by each new creation, says: This is good. And then God creates a creature with the capacity, also, to look at diversity, and to look at novelty, and to say: This is good! And we are told in this story that we are made in that God's image.

What is the characteristic of the God of Genesis? Unearned love that can only be made real when it is given away. And so without obligation, God creates a diverse and flowering universe, because God cannot be God if God cannot love. We are, my friends, in God's image. And we also, though, shrivel up and die if we do not have the ability to pour out our love; to celebrate difference; to rejoice in novelty; to see in each other divine sparks; and to be delighted and thrilled by what we see. That is, says the Bible, our most God-like attribute.

We love and serve and were created by a god who also says "We dont say you cant play". In fact, we actually need each other, and we need the diversity that god created us with. Imagine what that depth of knowledge would do for the kids in our lives- knowing they belong to a god who loves them exactly as they are, and to a community

who does, too. Let's teach our children to see in each other those divine sparks, by recognizing them in one another.