

SESSION SIX

Building a Passionately Inclusive Church

Reading adapted from a message by Bill Hybels

Just a quick scan of the international scene these days reveals a level of division and murderous hatred rarely witnessed in human history. We have seen horrendous suffering due to ethnic disputes. People are prepared to kill whole groups of people for the “crime” of being different.

A quick scan of our national scene unmasks a level of racial resentment and division that ought to make all of us wake up and smell the coffee. Even if people don't act on every impulse, the tensions beneath the surface are always there, and frequently make the evening news.

A bit closer to home, I've been thinking a lot about the condition of churches around the country. The ten o'clock Sunday morning hour is the most segregated hour in America's week. That is very sad. And going beyond that, while millions of openhearted spiritual seekers are just waiting to be invited and enfolded into the community of the local church, many churches really don't seem to care that much. They are talking

about peripheral matters instead of grace. They are not challenging and commissioning their members to open their arms to people beyond their walls. Instead, there are the subtle signals given as to who is welcome and who isn't, who has their act together enough to come in and who doesn't.

Sometimes when I think about the hatred, the divisions, the apathy, I feel overwhelmed. I wonder if there is *any* hope for a change. But then something deep within me whispers, "God can change the composition of a human heart." He can. God can transform a hateful heart into a loving heart. God can transform an apathetic heart into a strongly caring heart. God can bring passionate inclusivity into a heart that has only known passionate exclusivity. But I have a distinct feeling that only God can.

Is There a Blockage in Your Heart?

How is your heart today? What is going on inside of it? How open is it to people of different races? How open is it to people of higher or lower educational or economic status than you? How open is your heart to people who differ with you politically? How open is your heart to people who are far from God? You know the type—profane, immoral people.

If you look closely at your heart, you might find that you have some heart disease. You might

find that there's some blockage—a restricted flow of grace where love should be coursing through your veins.

One day, Jesus was surrounded by a crowd of spiritual castaways—scoundrels, really. They were the kind of people who make the most upstanding church people bristle. They had the kind of morals and vocabulary that was just not acceptable. But they were listening to Jesus with riveted attention.

While Jesus was talking with this crowd, the religious leaders of that day took note of Jesus' interaction with these people and they began murmuring among themselves. Someone of Jesus' stature should not be so careless about the company he keeps. Surely, he should show more discernment.

Surely, there are some people who should be included and some who ought to be excluded. There are some who should sit in the front of the bus, and there are some who should sit in the back. There are those with accents, and those who speak properly, like me. There are those so incredibly stupid that they vote the wrong side of every political issue, and then there are people like me who get it right every time.

The Pharisees thought they had it all figured out. They knew who mattered and who didn't.

But before we judge the Pharisees too harshly, it is my long-held belief that every human being

carries in his or her heart an unpublished, but quite conscious, list of who has value in this world and who doesn't. It is a part of our shadowy side. It is a reflection of our fallenness—a manifestation of the evil at work within us.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but I have a list. I have tried for twenty-five years to shrink the list. I'd love to say that my list is all gone. But still sometimes, in unguarded moments, when I least expect it, my heart turns cold toward certain kinds of people. I find myself freezing them out and keeping them away and setting them aside and excluding them.

I let them know in certain ways that I have no interest whatsoever in being in community with them. I don't want to know and be known by them. I don't want to love and be loved by them. I don't want to serve and be served, celebrate and be celebrated by them. I just don't. Even worse, I lose clarity on how God feels about them.

The truth is, you have a list, too. Don't say you don't. We all have a list. Part of growing as a spiritual person is to stop denying that our list exists. We need to become ruthlessly aware of it. Most of all, we need to ask God to do the kind of heart surgery that only he can do.

Pursuing Passionate Inclusivity

As you sit reading these words, whether you are rich or poor, black or white, whether you are

male or female, young or old, educated or uneducated, scarred or squeaky clean or anything in between, you are more precious to God than you could ever imagine. Your being in community with him is such a big deal that he took the most extreme measure he could take. When his arms were extended and nailed on the crossbar they were extended to you—simply because he wanted *you* included. And he did it without batting an eye, because you matter to him.

The reality of that truth always has a way of melting the hardness and exclusivity of my heart. When I realize how much I matter to God, then I start looking around at other people and I think, “Well, then he matters to God, too ... and she matters to God ... and he matters to God.” I start realizing that every person I interact with today, or tomorrow, or every day for the rest of my life is someone for whom Christ died. If they matter that much to him, they ought to matter to me. My arms should be open wider. I should be passionately inclusive of every breathing human being.

When I let these kinds of thoughts seep into my spirit and become the prevalent thoughts in my mind, I begin to feel a bigger heart toward people. I look at them differently. I care about them more. I long for them to come to Christ and then come into community in a little group in a church where they can be known, loved, served,

and celebrated. It's the strangest thing to feel your heart get bigger.

What would happen if all of us got honest about our lists. What would happen if all of us got serious in praying, "God, increase my ability to love; enlarge my capacity to include; grow my desire to extend Your community to a wider and wider circle of people"?

I think God would respond ... and transform. I think he would soften our hearts and open them wider.

May we commit together to making that choice—to becoming radically inclusive people, in radically inclusive community that passionately reflects the heart of our radically inclusive God.

Spiritual Exercise found below

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Y

our challenge this week is to live with this prayer:

Lord, increase my ability to love, and enlarge my capacity to include.

Consider writing the prayer on a card and posting it on your dashboard, your mirror, or your desk. Then, as you go through your day—at work, in the neighborhood, in the store, at church—try to become aware of your own personal list. What kind of person do you tend to avoid or feel cool toward? What factors tend to make you want to exclude instead of include? Ethnic background? Economic class? Gender difference? Political views? Body shape?

As you pray the above prayer through these encounters, what difference, if any, does it make on your desire to extend Christ and his community? What realistic steps could you take to begin breaking through these barriers?

