

ALIENATION

READINGS: Gen. 4:1-16 & John 2:13-22

As some of you may be aware I will be graduating this December with a bachelor's in theology from Bishopdale Theological College. Over this past year one of the things I have intentionally been trying to do is to read the writings of Christians from non-Western cultures. And they often have very different takes on what it means to be followers of Christ because they often have very different experiences. Sometimes these ruminations are inspiring. Sometimes they force me to reconsider my worldview. And sometimes they make me wonder if we have lost the original message of Jesus. One of the anecdotes I came across was from Dr. Salim Munayer on his interactions with Western Christians.

“When you’re a Christian and you’re a minority you desire to be in contact and fellowship and relationship with Christians from other places. I do remember visiting a church in Dallas, and they said “we have a brother from Israel” and I spoke for a few minutes and after that people came to shake my hand. I still remember very vividly and distinctly one man came and said “Oh I’ve so longed to shake the hand of somebody from Israel, I love the Jewish people!” and I said yes great, I do love the Jewish people too but I am not a Jew I am a Palestinian. This man took his hand from my hand, turned around and left. I mean, and you experience that again, and again, and again. And you ask the question what’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with my Christianity? What’s wrong with this people?”¹

And this desire Munayer has to belong and the fear of isolation is as old as humanity itself. In fact the first stories in the Bible, Adam and Eve, and Cain and Able, are about exile.

The story of Cain and Abel is one of two brothers, one a farmer and the other a grower of crops. When it comes time to make a sacrifice to the Lord both brothers offer a sacrifice representative of their labour. Abel brings forward a sacrifice of the best firstborn lambs from his flock, whereas Cain brings forward an offering of fruit. However God’s favour falls on Abel and not Cain, angering Cain. He lures his brother out into the fields where there will be no witnesses and murders him. When he is punished with exile he protests that the punishment is too much to bear. He is to be banished from the fertile land, from the presence of God, and from his community. This last one is especially frightening for Cain because he must leave the safety of his community leaving him at the mercy of whoever he may come across.

Community and the desire to belong has been a huge part of humanity throughout history. Living in community provides increased health benefits. Hunter-gatherer societies were largely egalitarian because they lived at a near subsistence level in which everyone played their part in the fight to survive. The men formed tight-knit hunting groups in which they would risk their lives for each other in the danger of the hunt, and at night they would re-enact these hunts around the campfire for the rest of the tribe. During the agricultural revolution, in which the Cain and Abel story takes place, humans had a more sustainable food source in the form of animal husbandry and growing crops. If the farmers produced a surplus they could support other members of their community who became tradesmen or soldiers. This led to war between communities for more resources and this meant that communities became a means of protection from predators – both human and beast.

¹ *With God On Our Side*, directed by Porter Sporkman Jr. (Rooftop Productions, 2010)

But now Cain has been exiled from this safety, scavenging for food and in constant fear that the other people he encounters will kill him. Of course, as we know, he eventually founds a city. But his story tells us about those who are in spiritual exile.

Earlier this year I read a pastoral psychology meta-study giving an overview of various studies about the effects of alienation on minorities in churches.² These studies looked at people who wanted desperately to be in the church but for some reason they were made to feel like they didn't belong. The studies found that there were two threats that these minority groups faced in the church. The first was called "distinctiveness threat" in which they were denied membership in the church because of their minority status. The second threat was termed "threats to social identity" in which they were devalued and church members were urged not to associate with them. If these attitudes were not challenged and the minority member was allowed to internalise them, they had feelings of invisibility, defectiveness and self-hatred. They were at a higher risk of clinical depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and developing social anxiety. Without a loving and supportive community they were at a greater risk of developing compulsive sexual behaviour, a phobia of intimacy, and substance abuse problems as negative coping mechanisms. Furthermore, they were at a higher risk of health issues relating to their immune system and their heart.

These people are hurting immensely because they do not have that sense of belonging. And we need to look at the example of Jesus.

I want you to imagine what it would have been like standing in the outer courts of the temple. Imagine the sound of the money changers and merchants calling out their prices, the bellowing and the bleating of the animals. Hear the sound of coins clanging together and the murmur of conversations happening around you. Now imagine the smells that must have filled your nose, the smell of livestock and their droppings in the hot mid-day sun. And then you have the crowds of people trying to get past you to enter the inner courts of the Temple. If you're imagining a scene of chaos in which you can barely hear yourself think then you're probably on a good track to figuring out what it was like. And now your attention is brought to a man who causing a mighty ruckus. He's flipping over tables and using a whip to drive the panicking animals out. Over the chaos you think you hear him yelling at people to get out something about marketplaces and his Father's house. This confuses you. After all, the people he's yelling at are just providing a service at the Temple. You can't use Roman coinage at the Temple because it features idolatrous images on it and the merchants are simply selling animals for the convenience of people who have to travel a long distance to the temple.

Now if you ask people why Jesus did this they'll often say that the money changers and merchants were exploiting the people. Now this can certainly be inferred from Jesus' statement in the Matthew and Luke accounts where he charges them with turning the Temple into a den of thieves. And Jesus certainly has a lot to say about people who oppress and exploit society's vulnerable in the gospels. But this isn't what Jesus is saying here. *"Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"* In other words, you have no business setting up your stalls inside the temple walls.

What was supposed to be a quiet place of worship and prayer had essentially become a market. And it wasn't just anywhere inside the temple. God-fearing Gentiles were allowed to worship at the temple as long as they kept to the outer courts away from the Jewish worshippers who were allowed to go further into the temple. And it was in this place set aside for the outsiders to worship

² Mann, Michael. "The Nexus of Stigma and Social Policy: Implications for Pastoral Care and Psychotherapy with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Persons and Their Families." *Pastoral Psychology* 62, no. 2 (April 2013): 199-210. *Religion and Philosophy Collection*, EBSCOhost.

that all of this chaos was taking place. What they had done was they had paid lip-service to having a safe place for “the other” but they had made it almost impossible for “the other” to experience God. And so Jesus casts the chaos out of the temple and restores it to a safe place of worship for the Gentiles.

And really this is one of the key characteristics of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus constantly sought out, and was sought after, by outsiders – those who didn’t belong in the religious community. In fact some of the most powerful stories of faith in the gospels come from those outside of the religious community – the woman who was considered perpetually unclean because of menstrual issues, the Syrophenician woman who refuses to be turned away because of her race, the Roman centurion, and the thief on the cross. And then you have the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, the Greeks who desired to meet Jesus, and Zacchaeus the tax collector. In fact, we’re told at times Jesus couldn’t get a moment to himself because everyone wanted to be with him. Maybe it was because of the love he showed them and maybe it was because the outsiders realised that Jesus was also an outsider in his community. You see, the Pharisees – the gatekeepers of God’s people didn’t like that Jesus was letting in the outsider. In John 12 you get that superb moment of irony in which they say in despair “we can do nothing for the world is going after him”, not realising that they themselves are actually the ones that are worldly. And this malice culminates in their plan to kill him.

But remember that Jesus predicted that this would happen to him! Right after he drove the money changers and the merchants out of the Court of the Gentiles he told his bewildered disciples that if you tear this temple down he would rebuild it in three days. And the cleansing of the temple and this cryptic statement are linked in a way that isn’t quite obvious.

Why was Jesus crucified? I’m not asking a theological question. Rather why crucifixion? In Evangelical circles we often emphasise the painfulness of the crucifixion when we preach the Gospel message. We go into gruesome detail about the whipping, the nails going through his hands. But if the idea was simply to make Jesus suffer physically there were far more torturous execution methods that we know the Romans used. No, the purpose of the crucifixion was to send a message. Like Cain, Jesus came from a culture that primarily used shame as a punishment. When you were crucified you were taken outside the city walls, striped completely naked, and lifted high for everyone to see. You became persona non grata, an outsider, cursed by God, an exile from your community. This is a complete destruction of your identity. To suffer the fate of crucifixion was considered so humiliating and taboo that the Roman writer Cicero wrote “Even the word ‘cross’ must remain far, not only from the lips of the citizens of Rome, but also from their thoughts, their eyes, their ears.”

And Jesus willingly takes this humiliation upon himself. But as we know that is not the end of the story. In his death, his humiliation at the hands of society, he is glorified by the Father and given the title of conqueror. And he becomes the new temple. And in this temple there is no court of the Jew or court of the Gentile, no court of the white or court of the black, no court of the male or female, no court of the slave or the free, no court of the politically conservative or liberal, no court of the gay or the straight. Rather when one is crucified with Christ these labels that society uses are no longer the primary thing that defines you. What defines you is your relationship with the one who welcomed all.

The early church was full of disagreements over race, festivals, circumcision, dietary laws, interpretations of Genesis, the nature of what exactly Jesus did on the cross, etc. But what they had in common was their understanding that the grace of Christ was bigger than their divisions.

And when we allow our identities to be crucified and choose to view each other as brothers and sisters in Christ we learn how to empathise with the other and see them as loved by God. This is seen beautifully in the passing of the peace before communion. I may disagree with your political or theological views. We may have very little in common except Jesus. But when we clasp our hands together and sincerely wish the peace of Christ on each other we are affirming that we are not enemies but a family in which every person is valued and belongs. And then we go up to receive communion as brothers and sisters we, to quote Thomas F. Torrance, come forward to proclaim the death of Christ with empty hands and no offering to give, our hands are filled with the blood and wine as the offering Christ gave on our behalf, exchanging our poverty with grace.

And this is why the most violent act of Jesus was not in driving out animals or flipping over tables. The violence of Jesus was that in his life, death, and resurrection he conquered the system that put people into boxes with value judgements attached and instead put everyone on the same level before God. No one in this room is more deserving of God's grace than another and not one of us is better than anyone in this room.

But unfortunately we don't always live that. The famous evangelical Tony Campolo once told the story of a young lady named Mary in his community who was pregnant. But she wasn't married. So Campolo went to her house to talk with her and share the Gospel. That day Mary gave her life to Christ and felt a freedom she had never felt before. And Mary even started attending Campolo's church much to his delight! But then she stopped coming. After two months of her absence Campolo decided to visit her to find out what was up. Mary explained that she couldn't bear the shame and dirtiness she felt about herself. Campolo was confused. "Don't you know that Jesus forgave you of your sins?" he asked. And Campolo said that what happened next will haunt him forever. Mary replied "Yes, I know that Jesus has forgiven me. But the people of your church won't forgive me".

Let's not be that church. Let's not be the church that puts obstacles between others and Jesus. Let's be the church that embraces the Mary's of the world. Let's be the church that is known for the same radical, inclusive love that Jesus showed to others, even if it means bearing the scorn of others. Yes it will challenge us. It will mean welcoming people who aren't like us, maybe even people we secretly think are beneath us. But it will mean becoming more like Christ and loving that person who has long been haunted by the feeling that they don't belong in church. Because it might just be the person sitting next to you.