

Proper 16 Year C: 24 & 24 August 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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“...Jesus loves us in spite of ourselves, in spite of the labels we ascribe to one another. Jesus brings healing and wholeness where society and its norms breaks us apart. Jesus brings love.”

Isaiah 58: 9b-14
Hebrews 12: 18-29
Luke 13: 10-17
Psalm 103: 1-8

What, if anything, is the difference between the words tolerate and accept? We often exchange one with the other, and I believe we do a disservice to these words in doing so since each connotes a different attitude.

When I tolerate something or someone, I am basically saying that I allow an occurrence or even existence thereof while not fully embracing said practice. That is to say I put-up with what I am asked to without validating anything. To accept, on the other hand, does validate an occurrence or existence. I consent and affirm that which I am being exposed to. I may not always fully understand, yet I embrace the other or the idea of the other. One word implies things may change, while the other negates that need – that matters are okay as they are. They may not be perfect, but they are who they are and there is no need to change to meet another's idea or belief. You may argue this is simply semantics, but for many folks, it is a matter of survival since to tolerate or accept is essential to those who live with the stigma of being labeled according to society's bias and prejudice – what I call our “isms” and “phobias.”

Just for example, take the LGBTQ+ community. In my own family, I am loved and accepted as a son, a brother, and an uncle. My orientation is rarely mentioned or talked about and my partner is not even addressed. Matter-of-fact, I have been informed that he and I are not allowed to stay together if he accompanies me on a family visit, which he has never done. The result of this attitude is, of my volition, I choose to stay at a hotel when I do visit. The orientation is tolerated but not accepted. This is often a truism for anyone who lives with a

social stigma that deviates from accepted norms and paradigms. There is a real difference between tolerating someone and accepting that person or person's belief. The crippled woman in today's gospel is just such an individual.

She does not conform to established norms and lives with the social stigma of being a sinner, for what else can she be living with such deformity. After all, such physical ailment is a sure sign that she, or someone in her family, has sinned against God. She is barely tolerated, but will never be accepted, especially, it seems, by the religious of her day. The scribe of this story does not even give her the dignity of a name. She is, for all practical purposes, invisible. Unseen! Unacknowledged! Unaddressed! Personally, I know how that feels, as I am sure some of you do.

If you can, imagine now living in her shoes. Of never being able to stand-up straight. Of always being confined to a field of vision that is cast downwards and limited by the boundary of one's peripheral vision. She must strain to see the sun, the sky, the stars; to see who is ahead of her or what obstacles lay in her path. Is she begging for food? For shelter? Does she have family that can assist her? For all intents and purposes, she is alienated and outcast, deprived of her basic humanity because she bears a stigma upon her body, the attributes of being different. Until, that is, she encounters Jesus.

I am sure she is use to the degradation, of being excluded from participation in humanity itself. Imagine her surprise then as she simply walks by and having Jesus call out to her. By this simple act, Jesus acknowledges her. She is not invisible, at least not to Jesus. I can only speculate about what she must have felt. She had not gone there seeking him out, nor did anyone within his company point her out. Jesus simply saw her and called to her. Was she afraid? Anyone who lives in the shadow of their label that differentiates them from social norms knows that fear; can empathize with that fear. Yet, she goes to Jesus. Why would she not. Jesus may have been the first person to see her, to actually see her, and not as someone to tolerate or avoid. She says nothing to him and yet he heals her, after which she gives praise to God. And what do the authorities have to say about this? They say Jesus acted against religious norms. Wow, doing what is right gets you condemned - not an unfamiliar story.

This unnamed crippled woman metaphorically represents each and every one of us, for each of us is likewise limited in our vision. We are all crippled by our own biases and

prejudices, our “isms” and “phobias.” We are so very often limited by our own paradigms of what we tolerate and/or accept; by our own limited worldviews. And then there is Jesus.

Jesus sees beyond the limits of our human perception and loves the other simply for who they are. No conditions. No expectations. Jesus loves her into wellness by acknowledging her existence, by seeing beyond the physicality of her body, of seeing her simply as a child of God and as such worthy of love. That is amazing good news

Contemporary writer, laicized Roman Catholic priest, Brennan Manning, the author of the book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, has said “[that] the outstretched arms of Jesus excluded no one, not the drunk in the doorway, the panhandler on the street, gays and lesbians in their isolation, the most selfish and ungrateful in their cocoons, the most unjust of the employers and the most overweening of snobs. The love of Christ embraces all without exception.” He argues that “the gospel of grace has been twisted into religious bondage;” deformed and distorted, it leaves us burdened and spiritually misshapen, not unlike the crippled woman. The weight of religious expectation that chastised Jesus for healing on the Sabbath is endemic of a socio-religious illness that permeates our culture even today. However, it remains germane to Jesus’ methodology, which supersedes such prejudice, to express God’s love for all in an effort to build community and relationship.

In spite of God’s continuing grace expressed through Jesus’ open arms, we remain yoked to paradigms that foster hardship and affliction. The privileged few exert power to suppress the majority, leading many people to believe that self-established norms and paradigms are good for the efficacy of society. These rules of law – canon or civil – in fact, entrenches power over others rather than fostering empowerment of the many. Jesus’ actions undermine such myopic visioning. His actions bring healing through the acceptance of the other just as they are. He sees what is invisible to others, and thus embraces the rejected of society.

We have countless biases and prejudices in our culture supported by religious doctrine. We have only to remove the yoke that binds us to the paradigms that distort others who differ from our norms, for in the eyes of God, there is only love which supersedes all else. Rather than simply tolerate those who differ from us, what if we accepted them, loved them, embraced them? What if we took time to hear their story; to listen to their journey, their trials and joys. What if we did all that before passing judgment? What if we, like the crippled woman, are

being asked by Jesus to have faith in God's grace to love all? Imagine what the world might be like, if only we would surrender to God and allow Jesus' arms to embrace us, to love us. That is my take away from today's gospel: Jesus loves us in spite of ourselves, in spite of the labels we ascribe to one another. Jesus brings healing and wholeness where society and its norms breaks us apart. Jesus brings love. And thus, I ask you: who or what do you tolerate when in fact you need to accept and love as Christ loves you? May we go forth this day to love others as Christ loves us! May the healing of the crippled woman be upon each of us as we strive to open our hearts (and our arms) to those whom we fail to see.