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Christ Church Gardiner
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Good morning. I know that it's warm and muggy, and we've asked everyone to wear masks again so my gift to you today is a short sermon.

I've already preached once this weekend. On Friday, I had the privilege of being the chaplain at Camp Bishopswood, our Episcopal summer camp in Maine. My daughters, Catherine and Sarah, head there this afternoon for a week. It's a great camp. Jeff grew up going there in the summer, and I was on staff there the summer before we were married. We've stayed connected to the camp in a variety of ways over the years, and it's always a joy to go back.

This past week, the counselors and campers were talking about inclusion and diversity, and that's what they asked me to preach about. Inclusion, or its opposite, exclusion, is something most anyone who has survived middle school knows all about. In my homily for the campers, I recounted a story of myself as a 6th grader, when for a few short weeks, I found myself in the much-coveted position of being one of the popular girls. I was never really sure why or how, but it may have had something to do with the rockin' perm my mom finally let me get. Whatever the reason, this new position in the social hierarchy of middle school was briefly exhilarating, but it made me act like a jerk to some of my friends.

If you remember, and I know it's been a while for most of us, middle schoolers sometimes believe that the only way to be included—to be in the inner circle of popularity—is to exclude others. They often define chosenness by designating others as unchosen.

And unfortunately, some adults never grow out of that mentality. Even institutions sometimes have this culture of inclusion and exclusion, insiders and outsiders. The Christian church has certainly been as guilty of this culture, almost since its birth.

The thinking goes something like this...if I can name who is excluded from God's saving grace, then I will feel more assured that I, myself, am included in that grace.

And truthfully, our Gospels often feed into this thinking with their quotes from Jesus like the famous John 3:16—"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." And a line from our Gospel reading today, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me, and I will raise that person up on the last day."

These lines have been used over time to assert that there is an exclusive quality to God's grace. That one must believe certain things about the person of Jesus in order to be "saved," whatever we mean by that.

I'm not going to be able to give you a definitive explanation this morning about why I believe that God's grace extends to everyone, despite what we think we hear in our Gospels sometimes. Remember that I said this was going to be a short sermon.

But I have just a few thoughts that I want to share. The first is that one of the themes that returns again and again throughout our scriptures is that God is God, and we are only grasping to understand God's nature. God is not our possession. and we can never really completely "know" God though maybe it's our life's work to try.

The second point I want to make is that it doesn't make a lot of sense that Jesus would want to exclude anyone from God's grace when he seemed to spend most of his life turning upside down the entire notion of insiders and outsiders. While others wanted to point out the sinfulness of people or those things about them that made them undesirable, Jesus wanted everyone to sit at the table together and enjoy a meal and each other's friendship. He ate with outsiders all of the time—with those of a different religion, with Roman centurions who sometimes persecuted his people, with Jewish tax collectors who were his people but seen as traitors, with zealots who wanted to overthrow the government, with people who had diseases that made them unclean, with sinners of every sort, and even with women who were usually meant to prepare and serve the meal, not sit at the table and enjoy it.

Everything Jesus did was about breaking down those walls that divided who was in and who was out. As Richard Rohr put it, "The only people that Jesus seemed to exclude were precisely those who refused to know that they were ordinary sinners like everyone else." (34)

It's always been hard for me to imagine that God—the God I know as embodied in the person of Jesus, could have favorites among his children. What kind of God would that be? So perhaps we should think about the things that Jesus says in the Gospels as being less about joining a particular group or excluding others from that group and more about all of humanity finding the "Way" that he talks so much about. The "way"—that journey that leads us to put aside those things that the world deems worthy and instead seek communion with all of humanity and creation and with God. The "Way"—which opens our eyes to see Christ in everyone. Maybe it's time to see as Rohr so eloquently puts it, "The point of the Christian life is not to distinguish oneself from the ungodly, but to stand in radical solidarity with everyone and everything else." (33). May it be so. Amen.