Our Words Matter:
Using Inclusive Language

A discussion series sponsored by

Phoenix Community Church, Kalamazoo

and

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What is inclusive language?

- Inclusive language is speaking and writing in a way that affirms the dignity and equality of all people

- Inclusive language is sensitive to the (often unintentional) impact of our words, especially on the marginalized.

What is inclusive language?

- By contrast, exclusive language exerts power over others by ignoring or even erasing them
    - "all lives matter" presumes to be inclusive but makes black lives invisible
    - God as "Father" hides the full complexity of the Divine, which includes femaleness

What is inclusive language?

- Using Inclusive language might mean:
  - Substituting inclusive words for exclusive ones
    - Example: "humanity" instead of "mankind"
  - Avoiding certain words
    - Example: "sin" is a word that has been used as a weapon against LGBTQ people. Is there another way to talk about what we mean by "sin"?
  - Adding words
    - Example: "sisters and brothers" instead of "brothers"
  - Beyond particular words: using stories and images that show the wide diversity of God's people

What does the Bible say?

- God is still speaking… what is God telling us about the words we use?

- Language matters

  - Matthew 12:36-37 (NRSV) "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

- Build people up

  - Ephesians 4:29 (NRSV) "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear."

What does the Bible say?

- Speak with love
  - 1 Peter 4:8-11 (NRSV) "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen."

Why does inclusive language matter?

- Concern for justice – not about pleasing certain groups or being "politically correct" but welcoming / including all of God's children

- Recognition that language often reflects prejudices of society. The old adage that "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me" is not true.

- Make the marginalized visible – matter of both justice and welcome

- Compassion for those harmed by the church in the past

- What we intend to say may not be what people are hearing – a lot of language carries "baggage" (i.e. implications which may or may not be intended)

- Welcoming and accessible language for "unchurched"

Why does inclusive language matter?

- Break-out discussion
  - We'll break into small groups for 10 minutes.
  - Questions for discussion:
    - Have you ever felt excluded or triggered by spoken or written language? Was it in church? What happened and how did it make you feel?
    - Reflect on why inclusive language matters. Is there one listed reason that speaks to you? Is there a reason you would add?
  - When we come back, we'll spend another 10 minutes sharing highlights from our group reflections.

Talking about God

- Sharing highlights of small group discussions…
  - Experiences with language…
  - Why inclusive language matters…
- Moving moving deeper with examples…

Talking about people

Here are some simple examples how our language could be more inclusive by using expansive language to highlight the excluded and move away from patriarchal terminology:

Instead of:	Use:
brothers	brothers and sisters; neighbors; friends
man, mankind	Humanity, humankind
sons (of God)	sons and daughters, children, heirs
chairman	chair, chairperson, moderator, group leader
kingdom	kin-dom, reign, realm
forefathers	ancestors, forebearers

Talking about people

- Can you think of other examples?

Talking about people

- Concepts can be an issue as well. What do you think of when you hear?
  - Pure as the white snow
  - Black heart or blacklisted
  - Blind fool
- Why might they be problematic? Are they always a problem?

Talking about people

- The best way for people to know they are welcome and to feel included is for them to see people like them represented in worship and among church leadership.

- For example, are LGBTQ people at least occasionally referred to in positive, affirming ways during worship?

- Are there LGBTQ people visible in church leadership?

- How can people share their own stories?

Talking about God

"Traditional" theology has often been used to reinforce patriarchy and sexism.

"If God is male, then the male is God." – Mary Daly

If all we ever use are images of the Divine as a male-gendered being, reinforced with male-centric language, then we are not so subtly telling our congregants that men are superior to women, that men are the ideal form of creation.

Talking about God

- What are ways we can refer to God other than using male imagery?
  - We can find a balance by using feminine images
    - Alternate pronouns such as he and she
    - "mother God" or "mother-father God" or "parent God" instead of "father God"
  - We can expand our understanding of God
    - "Holy One" or "Creator God" instead of "Lord"
    - "Lord's Prayer" might become the "Disciple's Prayer"
    - The Inclusive Bible uses "YHWH" and "Abba" instead of Lord and Father. Why might these be problematic too?
    - Avoid pronouns altogether when possible or maybe use second person or plural pronouns (i.e. you or they instead of he / him)
  - Note: we might also lose meaning when we change our words. For example, "Jesus is Lord" is a challenge to worldly power. Can we preserve the meaning while avoiding the word's negative connotations in our modern context?

Talking about God

- Images for God that go beyond personification…
  - God as mother hen sheltering her chicks under her wings (Matthew 23:27)
  - God as mother eagle teaching her offspring to fly, catching them on her wings when they are falling. (Deuteronomy 32:11)
  - God as love: God lives in us as love (1 John 4:12). Nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). The fruit of the Spirit is love (Galatians 5:22). God is love and love is from God (1 John 4:7-8).
  - God as within all things: The realm of God is within us (Luke 17:21). God is within all things, all things are within God.
  - God as rock, fortress, and refuge: God is the solid foundation which sees us through the uncertainties of life (Psalm 18:1-2).
  - God as life-giving: God, through each of us, is a life-giving force, a supplier of "living water" (John 7:38).
  - Other Biblical images for God: fire, wind, water, light, word, wisdom…

Talking about God

- Break-out discussion
  - We'll break into small groups for 10 minutes.
  - Questions for discussion:
    - What image first comes to mind when you hear someone say "God"? Does that image represent what you believe about God? What image of the Divine best works for you?
    - What words or images of the Divine make you uncomfortable or would you like to no longer use?
  - When we come back, we'll spend another 10 minutes sharing highlights from our group reflections.

Talking about God

- Sharing highlights of small group discussions…
    - Images for God...
    - What words or images need to be changed?
- Moving from concept to practice…

Talking about God

- "Homework":
  - Over the next two weeks, pay closer attention to the words used in the church liturgy, hymns, the pastor's message, etc.
    - Are their multiple images for God used? Or is it male-centric?
    - Are their words or phrases that bother you? Why?
  - Look over your church hymnal.
    - If you were picking hymns for a service, are there hymns you might not want to use? Why? Would changing a word or two help?
  - We'll begin next session with discussion of your experiences.

Talking about God

- Break-out discussion
  - We'll break into small groups for 10 minutes.
  - Questions for discussion:
    - Share your feelings and experiences of the last two weeks. Did you hear / see language or images that made you uncomfortable?
  - When we come back, we'll spend another 10 minutes sharing highlights from our group reflections.

Talking about God

- Sharing highlights of small group discussions…
  - Reflection from last two weeks…
- Moving from concept to practice…

Who should use inclusive language (and when)?

- So if we want to start using more inclusive language in our church, what does that really look like? Here's one model:

- Leadership speaking to or for the congregation
  - Message / reflection / sermon
  - Prayers
  - Liturgy

- The congregation as a body
  - Hymns
  - Scripture
  - Written materials such as brochures, policy statements, etc.

- When speaking for yourself, use the language most meaningful to you.
  - Example: in private prayers, sharing joys and concerns

Who should use inclusive language (and when)?

- What are some possible objections to using Inclusive Language?

  - Want to respect traditions of the church

  - Traditional language is very meaningful to me

  - It doesn't sound "right"

  - It's just political correctness

  - Can you think of others? What makes you uneasy about the idea of using inclusive language?

- How might we respond to these objections?

Putting concepts to use

- Practice: How might you adjust these scriptures to make them more inclusive but keep their intended meanings?

  – "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." – Matt. 5:16 (KJV)

Putting concepts to use

- Practice: How might you adjust these scriptures to make them more inclusive but keep their intended meanings?

    - "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." – Matt. 5:16 (KJV)

    - Here's the Inclusive Bible version: "In the same way, your light must shine before **others** so that they may see your good acts and give praise to your **Abba God** in heaven."

Putting concepts to use

- Practice: How might you adjust these scriptures to make them more inclusive but keep their intended meanings?

    – "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." – John 3:16 (KJV)

Putting concepts to use

- Practice: How might you adjust these scriptures to make them more inclusive but keep their intended meanings?

  - "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." – John 3:16 (KJV)

  - Here's the Inclusive Bible version: "Yes, God so loved the world as to give the **Only Begotten One**, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life."

God-talk: thinking beyond gender

- Do our words match our theology? A matter of integrity and authenticity

God-talk: thinking beyond gender

- Do our words match our theology? A matter of integrity and authenticity
  - Example: from "The Old Rugged Cross" (#260, Worship & Rejoice), a beloved Christian hymn…
  - "for 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died to pardon and sanctify me"
  - This is substitutionary atonement, but is that what we believe?

God-talk: thinking beyond gender

- Language to reconsider: nationalistic, substitution atonement theory, gendered, patriarchal

- Other words we commonly use in church may not mean to others what they mean to us.

- Some words can be triggers for church-caused trauma.

- Example: what does savior and salvation mean to you?

God-talk: thinking beyond gender

- One common understanding of savior: Jesus was sent to this earth to die for our sins in our stead so that we might go to heaven instead of enduring eternal punishment in hell.

  - We might reasonably assume that this is what one means if they use the word savior without any qualifications.

- Interpretation often used to build the church's power through guilt (Jesus had to die a violent death because we're such awful people) and fear (if you don't follow the approved plan of salvation, then eternal damnation awaits).

- For many LGBTQ people this is traumatizing because they have previously been victims of church-inflicted guilt and fear, being told that the differences that form part of their core being make them an abomination in God's eyes.

- Are there alternative ways to think of savior and salvation?

God-talk: thinking beyond gender

- Theologian Paul Tillich: salvation is healing and liberation and has nothing to do with heaven or hell

- Savior and salvation are not the only words that carry emotional baggage either. Terms such as sin, atonement, hell, and many others also need careful consideration. Are there others you can think of?

God-talk: thinking beyond gender

- When we identify words we want to reconsider, should we redefine them or replace them?

- What about song lyrics such as "Jesus loves even me" or "saved a wretch like me"? What might this convey to a child (or adult) about their self-worth? Is that what we want?

God-talk: thinking beyond gender

- Figuring out what to do won't always be easy. For some, referring to Jesus as savior is a great comfort. For others, it can be a term of oppression. How do we provide spiritual nourishment for all people?

- The purpose here is not to argue which views are correct.

- The hope is that we will give careful consideration to the language we use, considering not only what we mean by using particular terms but also what the implications are to the listener.

- If we mean something other than the traditionally assumed meaning, can we expect that the listener is hearing what is meant or might they be hearing what their past histories and experiences have taught them?

God-talk: thinking beyond gender

- Break-out discussion
  - We'll break into small groups for 10 minutes.
  - Discussion:
    - Are there "church words" that trigger negative responses in you? What are they?
    - Can the words be understood in new ways? Are there different words we might use?
    - Especially when people react differently to different words, how can we make sure all are spiritually nurtured?
  - When we come back, we'll spend another 10 minutes sharing highlights from our group reflections.

Talking about God

- Sharing highlights of small group discussions…
    - Words that evoke a negative response…
    - Redefine or replace?
    - What about people who love that word / image?
- Moving from concept to practice…

Language in Worship

- Suggestions:
  - Say what you mean. Don't assume. For example, if by savior I mean healer and liberator, then I should use the words healer and liberator.
  - There may be times when it seems important to use the traditional term.
    - Clearly define the term each and every time it is used.
    - This will probably not be sufficient to do away with emotional reactions to particular words. However, it will make the speaker's intention clear and may help the listener reclaim the power of the hot button words.

Language in Worship

- It may not be a smooth transition
  - Inclusive language can, at first, sound odd to our ears but know that it will also be refreshing and uplifting for many
  - complaints about following policy; complaints about not following policy
  - traditional language can be very comforting to many at the same time it wounds others
  - requires a lot of thought and planning
  - limits song choices
- ways to start
  - Preaching (ministers usually have flexibility here)
  - Conversations
  - workshop or book study
  - Slowly introduce some new songs that are more inclusive

Resources

- UCC website:
  https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/local-church/
  mesa-ministerial-excellence-support-and-authorization/ministers/ministers_local-
  church-leaders/worship_inclusive-language/

- Arthur, Kenneth: *Out of the Ashes: Constructive Theology for Those Burned Out on Christianity*

- Borg, Marcus: *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored*

- Springer, Janice: *Nurturing Spiritual Depth in Christian Worship: 10 Practices*

- Springer, Janice: *I Know We're All Welcome at the Table, But Do I Have to Sit Next to You?*

- *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation*, Priests for Equality, 2007

- *The New Century Hymnal*, The Pilgrim Press, 1995

Final reflections

- As we wrap up, what are you thinking and feeling in this moment?

- We'd appreciate feedback on this discussion series in case we offer it again in the future.

- Recording and slides will be made available online.

- Closing Prayer