Why is so easy to use religion as a means to exclude?

I have struggled with this question for a lot of years. The wider Christian church (which is the perspective I come from and thus can speak to) has historically used the structures of religion, the words of God and Jesus to judge, oppress, and hurt people for generations. And by no means am I suggesting that The United church of Canada is a beacon of love and hope in a sea of shadow, that is far from the truth. Our church was involved with the development, implement and administration of the Residential School system; a system that was designed to use religion to colonize and assimilate the Indigenous peoples of this country. Today we aware of a number of other instance that non -white persons, clergy and laity, have been excluded, made to feel less than , and out right criticized, ignored and told to keep quiet when they have offered their wisdom, insight, gifts and themselves to the work of the church.

 In 1936 The United Church of Canada ordained the first woman into ministry, The Rev. Lydia Gruchy. However, it was not until years later that a pastoral relationship was found for her to serve in; namely because she was a woman in a otherwise male dominated field and scripture was used to keep her out. In 1988 The United Church of Canada made a motion that all persons, regardless of sexuality, could have full membership in the church. This meant that sexual orientation could no longer be used as means not to ordained or commission ministers of the church; as it had been for years prior, with the help of interpreting scripture and certain way. And still today, there are clergy that speak of the discrimination that they experienced and continue to experience because of their sexuality, identity and gender.

These are just some of the examples that come to mind in our own church when religion has been used as a tool to exclude. I understand the history and I am not one that is quick to throw stones, without first realizing who I am, who I represent and where I come from. Yet this past week I was genuinely shocked by the news that came out of the Vatican. I have a history with The Roman Catholic church and many of my extend family are devout and faithful Roman Catholics. We do not always agree with each others theology, but we often find common ground to stand and share together. I have not spoken about the recent remarks out of Vatican about same-sex marriage or union, and I hope to some day, but today I am simply back to the question of why is it so easy to use religion as means to exclude?

If you are not certain about what I am talking about, this past week the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, submitted their rulings on a question about same sex unions opened by Pope Francis himself. The question at hand was, " Does the Church have the power to give the blessing to union of persons of the same sex?" The response was, "No," followed by the words, "Priests cannot bless same-sex marriages because they cannot bless sin." This is 2021, many churches, The United Church of Canada include, have been blessing same-sex marriages, whether it was legal or not, for many years. And here we are again with a ruling from a prominent religious institution saying that same-sex marriage and all other forms of sexuality other than heterosexuality, are to be considered sin; thus they are using a religious ideal of sin, to separate people and so again I ask, why is it so easy to use religion to exclude?

I will admit that I quite biased in this debate and have myself been mocked, insulted and even threatened for my beliefs and willingness to officiate at same sex marriages. I am biased, I understand that and what I am about to say is biased as well, I will claim that too. As I read scripture particularly the

Gospels which describe the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the person, God's own son of whom all of the many forms of Christianity are based on, I do not see excluding others because of something different than what he was. That does not mean that Jesus did not have biases of his own, he certainly did. The best example of that comes from Matthew 15: 21-27.

In that passage a Canaanite woman seeks Jesus out and asks for his help. Jesus is encouraged to rebuke her , to send her away, by his followers, and he does by saying that he was sent for the lost sheep of the house of Israel; he then says this, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus calls her a dog, which absolutely is a slang term meant to show her that she is different because of who she is. The woman responds, however, in such a way that shows Jesus the error of his thinking and speaking, and in that moment, he changes his mind and heart, he sees the error of his ways and helps her. That passage shows the humanity of Jesus and his ability to learn and grow. Elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus constantly moves against the laws of the day by welcoming, touching and eating with people assumed to have been gripped by sin. Jesus offers them love; true unconditional love, he does not judge them, or turn them away, he simply loves them in the same way he loves the people closet to him.

For me, and again this is my opinion, that is the basis for our faith, unconditional love. If that is our root, then why is so easy to use that root, even the word love itself, to exclude? The truth is it is actually harder to exclude. To exclude people takes constant work, its not actually easy at all. Constant work to remind people that some do not belong. It takes work to keep people separated, to keep people's opinion and beliefs locked in a certain way. It takes time and energy and lots of work, because all the while, we know that what we are teaching and making rules on goes against what our Christian practise is based on which is unconditional love.

Even if you want to say that there are sinners and non-sinners and that those who sin should not have the same rights as those who do not, then how do you come to grips with the fact that Jesus ate and drank and touched the "sinners" of his day and not only that, but forgave them, healed them, and shared in community with them. To create an idea that some sin if forgivable and other sin is not, is wrong. To create an idea that being who you were born to be is a sin, is wrong. To say that a relationship built on trust and love is wrong, simply because it is different then what you have or know, is outrageous and it does not follow the Gospel that our faith is built upon.

I am sorry that my devotion today is heavy, but I am baffled. I am baffled how people will work so hard to hurt others. I am baffled that people will spend time, not only thinking about it, but enacting policies that say to others "you cannot have what I have, because I deem you to be a sinner, not based on actual sin, but on what I think is sin." I baffled how some are so willing to fight for the "Human Right" to not, for example, where a mask, but are so happy to allow the rights of other humans to constantly be denied because of racism, sexism, homophobia and bigotry. I am baffled how an institution that has historically covered up its own sin is so quick to claim sin in others. I am baffled, saddened and dismayed.

Again, I can only speak of my own thoughts and feelings. I can only share from my perspectives and so facing yet another example of religion easily being used as a means to exclude I want to end by saying something that I hope you will all hear clearly that I hope you all take to heart and share with others. To borrow the words of recent Pride t-shirt campaign, **"This minister loves you"** and I will add, **"and loves you unconditionally."** Why? Because I was called to ministry by God who has clearly taught us and shown us time and time again about the power, the meaning, the lasting goodness and grace of UNCONDITIONAL love. I cannot control what other religious institutions do or say, I can be baffled by it and certainly am, but all I can control is what I say and do and I will always choose to love, fully and unconditionally, regardless of anything and everything.

Sincerely,

Rev. Adam Hall