

Imagine this: Pope Francis greeting fans on New Year's Eve from behind a rope line. Francis shook hands with an elderly nun in her habit, high-fived some kids bundled up in their winter garb, and a young girl atop her dad's shoulders. Then he came upon a woman who solemnly crossed herself and seemed to be praying. As Francis turned away, she forcefully grabbed his arm, yanked him backward, and wouldn't let go. Out of character for him, but still completely understandable, the Pope slaps the woman away and huffs angrily.

Jesus is at the synagogue at Capernaum, on the holy day of the Sabbath. After being baptized by John, being tempted in the wilderness, and calling a few disciples, his public ministry is really starting to take off.

He's here to talk about God and study scripture and reflect on how to live faithfully, and it doesn't take long for crowds to begin to take notice. Jesus is a good teacher who spends less time quoting scripture and more speaking to and for God. The crowd is mesmerized, and probably claims him a better teacher than a run of the mill scribe.

I can imagine these comments stinging. It's like telling a guest preacher that they're a lot more interesting or have a better sense of humor than the usual person occupying the pulpit. Before we know it, Jesus comes face to face with an unclean spirit taking a man hostage, and the spirit recognizes him. This is significant because the average person was yet to know who Jesus truly was at this point. He gets the job done and heals the man, casting out the spirit. And although the spirit is commanded to be silent, the word of Jesus spreads

After the service is over, Jesus goes to the home of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, who is bedridden with a fever. He takes her by the hand and lifts her up. Moments later, Peter's mother-in-law is out of bed and serving them falafels for lunch.

Our action in Mark's Gospel is fast-paced, and by sunset the whole city was gathered outside the door. One by one, they bring the sick and the possessed to him to be healed, and commanded the spirits' silence. And why sunset? Up until now, these events have happened on the Sabbath, and now the Sabbath is over with the setting of the sun. Judaism calls for no work on the Sabbath, so their coming to Jesus would no longer be considered work. Jesus overstepped traditional bounds by healing on the Sabbath, but the crowds are not willing to do the same for him, not yet anyway.

Early in the morning, Jesus goes out to a deserted place to pray and recharge. But before long the disciples interrupt "Rabbi, everyone is searching for you." Warily, Jesus responds, "Let's go, people in neighboring towns need to hear from me, too."

It is in one of these neighboring towns that Jesus is approached by a leper, who is on his knees and begging. The leper is the first who came to Jesus on his own. The leper is crossing ritual boundaries, which are established by the Torah. These boundaries order their lives and secure Israel's identity in an increasingly secular and hostile world. And according to the Torah, lepers are out of bounds and pose a threat to society because there is no cure. Lepers can be cared for by charity, but they need to be confined at a safe distance outside of town. This strictness goes way beyond flu shots, face masks, and hand sanitizers. And yet laws of ritual uncleanness were often intended to protect the community from spreading disease. Jesus didn't recognize these boundaries. He touched the untouchables. It was a dicey move for someone just starting out. Jesus risks ritual defilement for the sake of saving a life.

The New Revised Standard translation of the Bible states Jesus had "pity" for the leper, which is often understood as compassion. You may see a footnote indicating a textual variant. It might say "anger" or "indignation" rather than "pity" or "compassion." In other words, upon seeing the leper, Jesus gets righteously indignant.

Both compassion and anger are possible in a situation where one is risking social capital. Jesus had compassion toward the disease of the leper, and anger at the social structures responsible for his plight.

When compassion is substituted for righteous indignation, rather than acting alongside it, it often fails to move a person to action. Even worse, it can lead to indifference. It's like saying after a school shooting, sending our thoughts and prayers, but doing nothing to bring about change. It's like saying you support the LGBTQ community, while claiming there are only two genders or that bisexuality is a myth in the same breath. It's watching terrifying wildfires in Australia, but not being willing to discuss the effects of climate change. It's feeling bad about white privilege, but being too comfortable in our moderate politics to build bridges of understanding and peace.

The approach of the leper was an act of faith, and because of Jesus' forceful response, the leper is changed.

The day after Pope Francis had his encounter with the forceful woman in St. Peter's Square, he said in his homily: "Love makes us patient." Then in an effort to apologize, he said, "So many times we lose our patience. Me too, and I apologize for yesterday's bad example."

Even the Pope knows we're not always going to get it right. As we finish out the first month of a new decade, we are filled with uncertainty. Every politician, monarch, or pope that ventures near a rope line understands that risks are lurking. There are overzealous, overexcited fans, but also crazy people intent on doing harm.

If love makes us patient, then it also has its limits. There are too many grabby hands, voices clamoring for our attention, and too many demands for our time. We end up stretching ourselves out too thin and it takes a toll. And this reminds us a lot of the frenzy Jesus will face as he continues through the Galilean countryside.

Keep in mind, there is always a possibility for danger, for Jesus or others, and it can feel like no sanctuary is truly safe. It lurks in St. Peter's Square, in the communion line at a Texan church, or at a Hanukkah party at the home of a rabbi in the city.

You know who just gets this? Sex workers and schoolteachers and tax collectors, and all who have been excluded. Ironically, these are those who readily recognized Jesus' very real authority, not the higher-ups of the Roman Empire.

There are those for whom good news is that there are insiders and outsiders, and that they are lucky enough to be the inside. To others, the good news is that you are no longer outsiders.

Any sociologist will tell you: there is no "us" or "them". No "insiders or outsiders." There is only "us".

And we at Salem love this kind of thing, don't we? We love an open door and an open table and as well we should.

But something started gnawing at my soul over this past week. Despite my personal and communal commitment to an open door and table, that I of all people still get trapped into the "us and them" mentality. Like how I consider those embracing openness us and those who oppose it as "them," and then all I've done is to create another division. I think those who use clobber verses to ostracize the LGBTQ+ community as "them". I think of the NRA as "them" and those who don't ordain women as "them" and people who listen to Nickelback as "them."

More and more, it seems, we "them" those of those of differing social or political views. The United Methodist Church is heading toward a split over the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy. Evangelicals draw a line in the sand by insisting that people must live with the gender they're assigned at birth. White nationalists claim we're created in the image of a white God, and not a God who's brown or black. American Christians regularly assert that God is on our side over against the nations of Islam.

The Gospel is only good news if it's for everybody. And that's a hard pill to swallow. If we think a holy space is one of domination and divisions, we haven't been paying much attention.

Which takes us back to Christ's authority through faith. The only time he was "standing above someone else" was hanging from a cross we prepared for him. Jesus did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but humbled himself to the point of death on a cross.

So the reason there is long longer a "them", and only an "us", is not because of a lofty, self-congratulatory commitment to performative inclusivity and being nice. It's because Christ made it so. God has taken the domination, borders, boundaries, and division among people and destroyed them.

In a week when I was particularly filled with self-righteous indignation in replacement of compassion – when I was pridefully standing above with my queer intersectional Christian feminism. I thought those who weren't like me clearly were not taking the high road, and this sounded like good news. Because keeping score and comparing myself to others and maintaining divisions is just so damn exhausting. So I am grateful to come back to a Gospel that tells us to build a longer table, not a higher fence. There is only us, no them, and I know that Jesus is the one to decide this.

What was true then runs parallel to today. Jesus still calls the tax collectors and children and sexworkers and housewives and social workers and Pharisees into the very heart of God. So come join us at this table, the holy of holies. Not because you made it past the velvet ropes, but because the ground at the foot of the cross is level, and there is room for you. Thanks be to God. Amen