

# ALL ARE PRECIOUS IN HIS SIGHT: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE CHURCH?

By Kenneth A. Pudlas, EdD

*Blessed are those who have regard for the weak;  
the Lord delivers them in times of trouble.*

(Psalm 41:1 NIV)

## Introduction

What does it mean to “have regard for the weak”; who are they? The Psalmist, David, showed extraordinary inclusiveness toward Mephibosheth, the grandson of his former nemesis, Saul. In David’s time it would have been expected that all family of Saul would be removed. No person with a physical defect was to enter the king’s presence. Yet David invited Mephibosheth, who had a physical disability which made him “unclean,” to dine at the king’s table. In the present day, “the weak” may refer to those lacking social capital or status and descriptors may include the marginalized, or the other. Such persons are at risk of not being included and certainly not being “invited to the table.” Another version of the verse above (Message) says to dignify those who are down on their luck. The purpose of this writing is to explore diversity and inclusion as they relate to the Body of Christ. Terminology is discussed below, but to contextualize the discussion, consider the following four scenarios.

Scenario one. A little girl surrounded by empty chairs sits in a church basement on Sunday School promotion day. All her same-age peers have been called and have left for their new class. She wonders, “What about me?”. She was overlooked. She is deaf. Is she one of “the weak” mentioned in scripture?

Scenario two. A family with young children enters church each week with renewed hope that they will be able to sit through the service. Sunday after Sunday they leave for home shortly after arriving. Their daughter has behavioural challenges and tends to “disrupt” the service. The unwelcoming attitude of fellow attendees is disappointing. They feel disinvited and discouraged - until they attend a new church where they and all of their children are welcomed and embraced. Are they an example of “the weak” mentioned in Psalm 41?

Scenario three. A man sits in a school gym on a Sunday morning with his two children. They are surrounded by strangers. An older gentleman approaches and introduces himself and asks their names and inquires if the wife/mother is present. Then, mentioning that he and his wife are having a few folks for lunch after church, asks if the dad and his kids would like to join. Suddenly realizing the time, he

apologetically excuses himself and hurries to the front to begin the church service; he is the pastor. The visitor is a single dad. Is he an example of “the weak” mentioned above?

Scenario four. In an article discussing the implications of demographic changes (Dyck & Pudlas, 2021), the co-author describes himself as *a brown soul in a white skin* and comments on his experience as someone not indigenous to the Canadian church and to the culture of the founders and leaders of the local congregation. Might ethnic or cultural differences be a cause of marginalization? Are these the “weak” that David references in Psalm 41?

## Definition of Diversity

The term “diversity,” as used in this article, refers to variations from some normative standard, be that in terms of cognitive, physical, or sensory abilities or socioeconomic variations, or gender, cultural, or ethnic differences. So, then an important question is: Who defines that normative standard? How do believers define it?

I am reminded of a chorus I sang as a child:

*Jesus loves the little children,  
all the children of the world.  
Red and yellow, black, and white,  
all are precious in his sight.  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

Reflecting on that chorus, I realize it has much deeper theological implications than those I comprehended as a child. When I sang that chorus as a youngster in Sunday School most everyone around me looked like me. Most were first- or second-generation Canadians whose families had arrived from Western Europe or Great Britain. Now, decades later, the diversity referenced in the song is much more evident in many mainline evangelical churches.

## Theology of Diversity

A recent article in this series (Dubbeldam & Pudlas, 2023) made the point that the Gospel is indeed for everyone. And that Gospel – that is, good news – is that Jesus loves everyone and, although God, he came in human form that his people might have life to the full (John 10:10) and live their lives with the promise of spending eternity with him. Part of living a full and abundant life means living in community and

fellowship with others. Certainly, the state of the world would suggest that not all people are able to live together in harmony. Ought not the church, the representation of Christ on earth, be different; the very essence of multicultural, margin-shrinking, inclusion?

### *Unity within diversity - shrinking margins*

Another thought for reflection that presents a perspective on unity within diversity is the Trinity. God is, at once: Father and Creator; Holy Spirit and Paraclete; Son and Saviour. The Trinity mirrors both diversity and unity. In John 17, Jesus, knowing human nature, prayed for his disciples and for all who would seek to be his apprentices:

<sup>20</sup>My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,

<sup>21</sup>that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

<sup>22</sup>I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—

<sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (NIV).

Christian faith is built on that truth, and that truth has potentially profound implications for how believers live their lives as individuals and as members of the Church. Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35.) The way believers love demonstrates who they are. Another chorus worshipers sang had the lyrics, “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love...”. In an increasingly diverse church body, Christians must find ways to be loving and inclusive of all.

All the scenarios presented above occurred in churches. The first occurred where the little girl’s family had been long-time members. The third occurred where the man and his children had never attended (but where they eventually become members). The first is perhaps an example of a “sin of omission”. The second and third are examples of what can happen when hearts are sensitive toward the marginalized stranger.

## *Apprentices of Jesus with inclusive hearts*

One reason for the different responses in the scenarios has to do with the *heart* of the responders. The heart/head/hands must be necessarily in confluence to result in *inclusive praxis* (Pudlas, 2019). That is, knowledge and skills are put into action by the motivation of the heart – the very essence of who a person is. Thomas Merton (1971, p. ii) says of the heart:

The concept of “the heart” might well be analyzed here. It refers to the deepest psychological ground of one’s personality, the inner sanctuary where self-awareness goes beyond analytical reflection and opens out into metaphysical and theological confrontation with the Abyss of the unknown yet present—one who is “more intimate to us than we are to ourselves.

Out of that *inclusive heart*, apprentices of Jesus, the conjoined parts of his body on earth, value, welcome, and include others into the church as a natural part of their Christian walk. As David included Mephibosheth, so believers are to invite and include others in enjoying the richness of participation and fellowship and communion with other members of the King’s family.

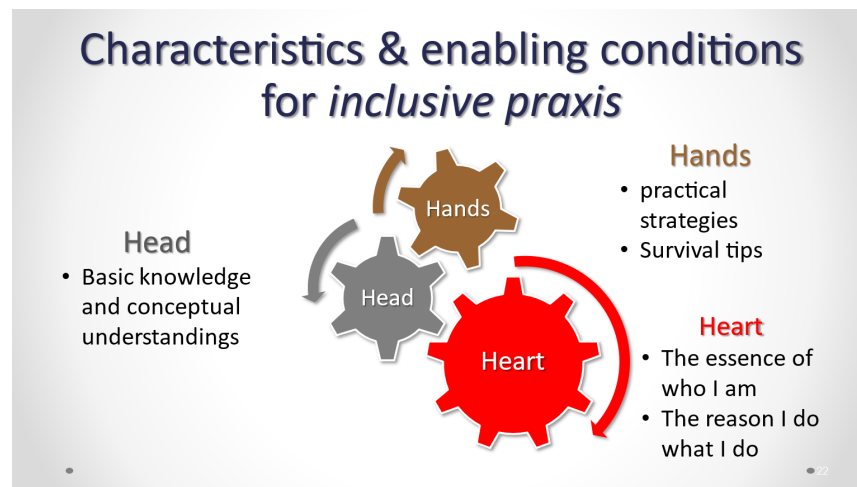


Figure 1. Inclusive Praxis

A pastor recently preached on the Gospel of Matthew as it speaks to inclusive praxis (Krausse, March 17, 2024). Matthew 7:21-23 speaks of “good fruit,” which is for the benefit of others, and which requires a good Gardener. The will of God the Father is that all would confess belief in his Son, Jesus Christ, and live a life of obedience, made visible to the world through love for

neighbours. The will of God, then, begs the question: who is a neighbour? A Christian theology of diversity requires believers to think deeply on that question, the context in which it was asked, and the implications for their heart-motivated obedience to the reply Jesus gave.

Jesus asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” The answer Jesus gave to the questioner, an expert in the laws of the day, was to love God by loving neighbours as ourselves. Perhaps realizing the difficulty – if not impossibility in human terms – of fulfilling the commandment, the follow-up question, “Who is my neighbour?” was asked as an attempt to justify loving only those who were akin to the questioner. The expert in the law recognized he was unable to love his neighbor as the commandment required. Instead of admitting he was a sinner who needed God’s grace and forgiveness, he sought to loosen the demands of the Law by narrowly defining his neighbor. Jeremiah 17: 9-10 states, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve” (NIV).

Recognizing this truth, Luke offers editorial insight to the second question: “But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus...” (Luke 10:29a). Believers may similarly respond to the imperatives of Scripture in the same way.

Again, in the Old Testament, Isaiah 29:13 records, <sup>18</sup>The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.”

The danger of apathy or a lukewarm, legalistic faith is described by Deere (1993, p. 150) who suggests,

Isaiah recorded one of the most tragic judgements brought on the nation of Israel... The divine stupor that God sent to Israel kept them from understanding why they were being judged... The legalism of the Israelites drove out the presence of God. They kept an outward form of religion, but they let their hearts wander far from God.

It may be possible to subconsciously ask, “Jesus, what is the least I can do and still be a considered a ‘good Christian’?” Are my neighbours those I know or with whom I feel comfortable? Certainly. But is that the limit?

Paul, writing to the Corinthian church instructs:

<sup>16</sup>So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.

<sup>17</sup>Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:  
The old has gone, the new is here!

<sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through  
Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:

<sup>19</sup>that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not  
counting people's sins against them. And he has committed  
to us the message of reconciliation.

<sup>20</sup>We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were  
making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's  
behalf: Be reconciled to God.

<sup>21</sup>God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in  
him we might become the righteousness of God. (I  
Corinthians 5:16-21, NIV)

Several points in this passage are germane to diversity. First, from verse 16, believers are not to regard people from a "worldly" point of view since they are new creations in Christ. What might that mean? Simply believers do not see them as disabled, divorced, male/female, and/or different in ethnicity, but rather as *Imago Dei*. Second, believers are Christ's Ambassadors - they are his earthly representatives, who are responsible for representing him authentically and for sharing the Gospel.

Jesus illustrated in the context of his response to the "greatest commandment" question, where and with whom the good news was, in biblical times, to be shared. The good news was to be shared with people whom his hearers held in poor regard. In the teaching that followed the question, Jesus told a parable that clearly demonstrates that our neighbor is those who share our daily lives, regardless of their ethnic, religious, or socio-economic status. Neighbours include those with various forms of learning challenges, differing sensory or physical disabilities, or differing marital status, and does not exclude based on gender. Jesus' life and teaching highlight actions that practically demonstrate love for neighbours. First, a caveat.

At the outset of my tenure as a professor at TWU I was teaching a course on psychological principles applied to teaching and learning. At the end of one of the early classes a student approached me and with unbridled frustration said, "I'm sick and tired of all these theories - just tell me how to teach!" The problem with that request is that there is not just one way to teach; students, settings, and situations vary. Over the course of the term, I explained that good teachers know *why*, which informs their *how*. In other words, it may be more helpful to be *descriptive* than *prescriptive* in discussion of how to love neighbours and to have regard for the weak. Those with a heart in tune with the admonition to love neighbours will seek knowledge and skills that enable them to demonstrate that love in tangible ways.

Belief in God is not enough; rather what God requires is that, once and because believers have received the free gift of his forgiveness, they do his will. Jesus said that he who does the will of his Father in Heaven will be saved. In the New Testament, James gives this instruction: <sup>22</sup>Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (James 1:22, NIV). And what does it say? Love God by loving your neighbour and yourself.

Believers demonstrate their faith is by loving God by loving others whom he has created. That love stems from the heart. Romans 6:17 (NIV) reads, “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to *obey from your heart* the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance” (emphasis mine).

What is that “pattern of teaching”? Part of the answer can be found in the answer to the “who is my neighbour?” question.

James 1:27 reads, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (NIV). In the era during which James wrote those words, there was no social support network, no foodbank, or drop-in centers. Rather, those who sought to be apprentices of Jesus were to demonstrate their love for God by loving others, including those who might otherwise be pushed to the margins. The neighbours may be literally the widows and orphans described above. Or they may be the abused person on the road to Jericho who was helped by the good Samaritan. . Perspective may be gained by reading Psalm 41:1 in the Message: “Dignify those who are down on their luck; you’ll feel good—that’s what God does.” To dignify means to make something seem worthy or impressive. As apprentices of Jesus, loving our neighbours means dignifying those God has created, regardless of whether they fit into our own definitions of normal or acceptable.

How can believers demonstrate that love? They do so by developing a *heart* for and an outward looking *sensitivity toward* others and their needs. I once heard someone say that some Christians are good at “hiding in their bunkers, tossing out Gospel grenades, and then dragging in those wounded by those grenades.” This is not the heart-inspired, purposeful seeking out the welfare and well being of others. A better scenario is the pastor who sought to know the strangers whom he had not yet met and followed up that knowing by offering hospitality.

## **Theory of Mind**

Certainly, to love someone requires that apprentices of Jesus desire to know them and know about them. They move from their church bunkers, or their bubbles, into the realm of others, seeking to understand them.

How do believers begin to welcome others? First, they begin by coming to know them. Larson and Shady (2017) suggest, “Christians need to be more intentional about a preparing to love their neighbours, even (perhaps especially) when those neighbours have different religious beliefs (p. 5). They do not love them by “throwing Gospel grenades” but rather by coming to know them as persons. It is important to enter into the sphere of the “other,” developing a sense of empathy, asking: who are you, what do you need, how can I help meet those needs? Why do believers too often fail to ask those questions? Theory of Mind (ToM), a relatively new psychological paradigm, may be instructive.

Theory of Mind is an abstract causal model, specifying how mental states like perceptions, beliefs, and desires combine to cause actions and feelings and so can be used for both prediction (e.g., given the target’s inferred beliefs and desires, predicting their actions) and action selection via planning (e.g., given a desired action, selecting the best intervention on beliefs and desires) (Ho, Saxe, & Cushman, 2022, p. 961). In psychology, the study of mind and behaviour, Theory of Mind (ToM) refers to the capacity to understand other people by ascribing mental states to them and recognizing that others’ thoughts, emotions, intentions, desires, and beliefs may differ from our own. Thus, having a theory of mind may be similar to having a capacity for sympathy or empathy. Therefore, while a Canadian “evangelical” may appreciate “the atoning blood of Christ,” and have an affinity for the “fundamentals,” those terms may not be perceived in the same way by others. If believers seek to have regard for those others and invite them into community, they need to understand their understanding.

In special education, ToM offers insights into persons who are referred to as being “neurodiverse.” In particular, ToM has been offered as a potential explanation for why persons who are on the Autism Spectrum struggle with appropriate social interactions. How might this apply to the command to love the neighbours in our lives?

Again, teaching young undergraduate university students, I was frequently amused to overhear, “I just saw this guy/girl... and I’m in love.” Since we were in a class that discussed cognitive, behavioural, and social psychological development, we would discuss “love” in its various forms. The conclusion reached was that to truly “love” someone that person must be known. That knowing is a continual process. For example, I only recently learned that my wife of more than three decades likes blue-grass music.

Theory of Mind suggests that believers need to develop understanding so they can “know” others and thereby develop the *heart* to love them as an act of demonstrating their love for God. The pastor who approached the



single father was endeavouring to enter into the sphere of “the other,” to know him as a person. His few simple questions (knowing) followed by an invitation to a meal (practical hospitality) were meaningful.

## Conclusion

Figure one shows the relationship between the heart - as the essence of who apprentices of Jesus are and the motivator of their actions - and their knowledge and skills. The heart has been discussed at some length. What of the other interrelated parts of the model - the head and the hands?

I have a friend who is a member of Rotary - an international service organization. One day I asked him, “Why Rotary?”. He responded with a question of his own, “You mean because it is not overtly Christian?” Then, he told of attending a backyard meeting of church elders several decades previously. The elders were bemoaning the fact that the community was not engaged in their church. With youthful temerity he dared to ask, “How many of you are engaged in the community outside of the church?” No hands were raised. Their response, he told me, was why he was a member of Rotary. The answer to loving neighbours may not be joining a service organization, but it may be one way.

My wife has a gift of hospitality, and she finds great delight in serving. She volunteers with an organization that supports families who are new to our country. Each week she uses social media to share the needs and each week she spends hours collecting donated items that she prepares for distribution to those needy families. She has made numerous acquaintances with the women and has been invited to the homes of some to enjoy ethnic meals they have prepared. Not only has she introduced wonderful new foods to her palette, but in accepting their invitations she has come to know them better and has given them the dignity of being hospitable. Sometimes loving neighbours means allowing them to give rather than receive.

In both the Old Testament and Jesus’ teaching, there is danger in being apathetic to neighbours. Believers are required to show practical love for them. In one encounter, people asked, “Jesus, when did we see you poor or hungry...?”. The essence of Jesus’ answer was: When you took time to see and know those on the margins, and in knowing them saw practical ways to meet their needs.

Is the Gospel for everyone? To understand Jesus’ teaching in the parable in Luke 10 it is important to understand that there was open animosity between Jews and Samaritans. Today loving neighbours means challenging and rejecting prejudice that exists in hearts and in society against neighbors. Perhaps unexamined “doctrine” (e.g., views on gender) is unexamined “dogma.” When believers think about those outside their immediate sphere (beyond their bunker or bubble), perhaps the urban, poor, or minority neighbor, are their perceptions loving? Or do they at some

unexamined level content themselves with unexamined assumptions such as laziness, no motivation, or failure to recognize lack of opportunity.

In the New Testament, James gives the instruction: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22, NIV). What the word says, Jesus highlights, is that loving neighbours requires examining the heart and acknowledging the cause and effect of living in a sin-cursed world. That sin includes prejudice, mistreatment, and injustice toward many “others” who may be on the margins.

This article has attempted to inform the question, “Who are the weak?” The discussion has explored ways in which believers might be more authentic apprentices of Jesus by including and loving those on the margins and has been more descriptive than prescriptive. Toward a more loving ministry, the following summary (see Bastress, T., 2020) is offered as points to ponder for reflection and to motivate and enable believers to “have regard for the weak.”

1. Acknowledge the reality and effect of (our own and societal) sin on our neighbor.
2. Expose the emptiness of religion that is apathetic toward our neighbor.
3. Reject the prejudice that exists against our neighbor.
4. Sacrifice time, money, and convenience for the betterment of our neighbor.

Again, the will of God the Father is that all would confess belief in his Son, Jesus Christ, which is marked by a life of obedience and made visible to the world through love for neighbours.

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Pudlas, K. A. (2024) *All are Precious in His Sight: What Does This Mean for the Church?*, Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research Journal [www.nimer.ca](http://www.nimer.ca) (retrieved Date Accessed).

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