Isaiah 42:5-9, John 5:19-24

“Inclusive vs. Exclusive”

 It has been a bit of a shocker this week. The shooting at the Empire State Building caused us to hold our breath, but we can exhale now. This past week also in the news, and you may have missed it, but Augusta Country Club has now begun to accept female members. Did you know that both of the new members, Condoleeza Rice and Darla Moore are card carrying Presbyterians? They are.

 If you thought of an exclusive club then Augusta would have to come to mind because of their very public policy of including men and excluding women was well known. So many of us have made decisions to be a part of an organization or group that is more or less exclusive. From fraternities to the Lion’s Club, wait, they let me speak there so they can’t be that exclusive. But pretty much all of us have been a part of groups that pick and choose who is going to be a part of them.

 Maybe even the church could be seen as potentially an exclusive group of people. At one time First Presbyterian was seen as the church where anyone who was anyone attended here and while not purposefully exclusionary, we may have had that reputation. Hopefully we’ve blown that out of the water and that is no longer a part of our identity.

 But we do live in an era where any kind of exclusivity is frowned upon. In seminary we learned inclusive language to describe God so that members who may have had abusive patriarchal figures in their life would be able to worship God in the fullness of all the images given to us in Scripture. I’m still more comfortable with the more orthodox and traditional description of God. Now my father was not perfect, but when I pray to my God I use the term Father and I don’t get images of Fred Bronkema but rather my eternal God.

 So because we live in a relativistic world and society, people are often offended by any exclusive claim that we may make. Faith is thought to be private and personal and our experiences can make the reality of God pretty much any way we would like it to be. Our Scriptures today show us something different, however. Our Scriptures show us that we can say something very definitively about our God that isn’t based upon how we feel or based upon our experiences that are always changing.

 We cannot be ashamed of having our faith point to Jesus and only Jesus. One cannot be a Christian and not love, worship, adore, and give your life to Jesus. He has to be the center of our faith and the end all and be all.

 Our Scriptures will point to a statement that reflects who we need to be and who Jesus needs to be in our life. Don’t be embarrassed by an exclusive Christology as long as you have an inclusive soteriology. I’ll explain that after we read the Scripture. Let’s read.

 **READ**

Let’s look at our OT Scripture reading. This is a classic Scripture that many say reflect God’s inclusiveness to welcome all people under his umbrella of love and care. Let’s look at that. God through Abraham chose a people to follow his desires and his wishes and he calls that nation, Israel, his bride. As they are to have no other God, so God has no other bride. The covenants that God makes with his people reflect his love for the Jewish people. The rest of the word is then judged according to how they interact with this people.

 We find this with Abraham when he is told that I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. Rahab is included in the people who are blessed because of the way that she treats the Israelite spies. In Isaiah we read the Lord has taken his people by the hand and protected them and kept them. There is a no-nonsense, unashamed exclusive claim that God makes by choosing the Jewish people to be his people. The inclusivity, the open arm comes in vs. 6 and following where this people were called to be a light so others could be freed from bondage and come to experience life with YHWH, God.

 This exclusive claim that God chose the people of Israel takes a different exclusive turn when Jesus come to earth as God incarnate. Jesus now, God himself, becomes the center of the faith and not a nation, a group of people. It is through Jesus that our relationship with God is defined.

 In our John Scripture, and many other Scriptures that we will see, we find that we believe that it is in Christ alone that we find the full revelation of God to us. Look at John 5 and this theme is repeated in different ways, but it is very evident. Jesus says in vs. 23 that those who honor the Son also know the Father. The root here for the word honor is Timon, which in is then used later in modern languages like Italian when you talk about fear you speak of timore. To honor Jesus is to love him and honor him as you love and honor God with a fear of realizing that he is the one who is identical to the Father.

 Let’s look at some more verses and see if it makes sense. John 14:6 tells us that I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me. Luke 10:16 tells us Whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me. John 15:23 states whoever hates me hates my Father also. I John 2:23 states no one who denies the Son has the Father. Romans 8:1 Paul states there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

 All of these statements point to the centrality of Christ at the cost of excluding any others who may lay claim to being a revelation of God aside from Christ. All roads, Scripture tells us, and I know this isn’t popular in this relativistic society in which we live, but all religious roads do not lead to God. Yes, there is only one God, but that one God can only be understood and experienced in Jesus Christ. Jesus, our Savior and Lord, has to be unashamedly at the center of our faith. This is an exclusive claim. I know it. You will not be popular in most circles by making this claim. You will be called closed minded, arrogant, and way too self-assured.

 Now, we have to lay that foundation of exclusivism. Isaiah having God tell us “I hold you in the palm of my hand.” Jesus tells us “No one comes to the Father except by me.” But what we also find in this Scripture is an inclusive soteriology. Okay, the 50 cent word for today is soteriology. Soterion means to save, or even to heal, same word, so when we talk about soteriology we are talking about what do we believe about salvation. Well, John 3:16 tells us that God so loved the world so that all would believe and have eternal life. There is no hint in God’s Scripture to those who can, and I pray, will come to enjoy eternal life. We find in Matthew 25 at the separation of the sheep and the goats that judgment day is going to be a huge surprise and when we get to that mansion God prepared for us we are going to be surprised by our neighbor who maybe we thought wasn’t part of our group to be included in salvation.

 We have to be okay with not playing God, while at the same time not being embarrassed by the exclusive claims that are made by our Savior Jesus Christ. In fact, if you look at vs. 22 we are told who judges? The Father doesn’t, but Jesus the Son does. But what kind of a judgment will you expect from someone who dies for you even, as Paul states, even while we were yet sinners and while we were still sinning?

 Listen to me carefully. Our inclusive soteriology means that your sin that you are bringing with you to church, that you are carrying around with you to work, that is affecting your family life and all of your relationships, has only to be laid at the feet of Jesus for him to forgive you, yes even you. He already knows your sins and has accepted them. You are included as his child if you would look to him for salvation. He does not exclude anyone from his love.

 If we are not able to personalize the exclusive claim of Jesus then we will be left out. But when we talk about First Presbyterian Church and its membership we had better be sure that it is always in terms of inclusivity. Personally I am a bit of a renegade in this subject because I’m not convinced membership serves a purpose except for a congregational meeting and leadership in a church. Everyone who is a members of this church at one time or another declared that Jesus is their Savior and Lord of this life.

 Next Sunday we are going to celebrate those who have come in over this past year by having their membership reinstated. Some have never stepped foot in this church in years, maybe because there was a sense of exclusivism that goes against Jesus’ commands. Our task as a church is to preach only Jesus but to make sure that we don’t become a group that only allows certain people in certain committees or group, or events or activities.

 If we focus on Jesus and our Savior alone, then all who come here will be equal and we will be a family that includes all. Amen.