

Abundant Life for All

Mark 9:33-37, Matthew 9:23-25, Luke 15:1-6, 8-9, Luke 8:1-2, & Acts 18:18

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“Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us.” The us is the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, the Trinity, three distinct persons all equal, all perfect in their love, compassion, and joy for each other making them one. Each of us is created distinct in God’s image to have love, compassion, and joy for each other, making us all one loving family. God’s creation was good. Soon human beings sought inequality, striving to be more powerful than God, striving to be more powerful than each other. Humanity brought blaming, comparisons, judgements, fear, hate, and murder into God’s good creation. The consequence was supposed to be death, however, God loves humanity too much to wipe us out and start over. God is gracious. God is loving us back into a good creation, where all are equal, one family, all enjoying abundant life. The result of humanities poor choices is hostility between people, hard labor to grow food, and men trying to dominate and control women. All of this is explained in the first three chapters of Genesis.

Jesus embodied, modeled, and taught the original good creation and the coming Kingdom of God. Jesus fed the hungry, mended relationships, and provided health care with healings. Jesus bridged every gap and broke down every wall, that divided people by power, wealth, education, religion, skin color, age, gender, and any criteria. Jesus brought all people together as equals. Jesus corrected those who were comparing, judging, and dividing people.

The lowest people in Jesus’ day were children and women. **Mark 9:33-37 NLT “After the disciples arrived at Capernaum and settled in a house, Jesus asked his disciples, “What were you discussing out on the road?” But they didn’t answer, because they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve disciples over to him, and said, “Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else.” Then Jesus put a little child among them. Taking the child in his arms, Jesus said to them, “Anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not only me but also my parent who sent me.”** Jesus played with children, taught children, healed children. Jesus multiplied the generosity of a young child to feed thousands. The lowest of the low was a girl. **Matthew 9:23-25 “When Jesus arrived at the official’s home, Jesus saw the noisy crowd and heard the funeral music. “Get out!” Jesus told them. “The girl isn’t dead; she’s only asleep.” But the crowd laughed at Jesus. After the crowd was put outside, however, Jesus went in and took the girl by the hand, and she stood up!”**

Scripture declares, “Jesus had to go through Samaria” to see the woman at the well. A lady who had a different skin color, from a different religion, from an outcast culture and was divorced by five husbands. In those days, a divorce was at the whim of the man. The male dominated society rejected her. Jesus had to talk to this woman to welcome her back into community, to declare that she belongs to God’s family, to quench her thirst with living water. In the gospel of John, it is this lady who is the first to declare that Jesus is the Messiah. She is the first evangelist. She forgave the men who divorced her and the men who oppressed her. She reconciles the relationship between the Jews and Gentiles inviting Jesus and the disciples to stay with them for two days, which they did.

Jesus was despised by many in power because Jesus was constantly welcoming those who were excluded back into community. Some were afraid that celebrating everyone as equal would somehow diminish their life. Others wanted to control others, to tell them what to do, how to live and where to live.

When those in control complained to Jesus, he told them two parables. **Luke 15:1-6 & 8-9 NLT “Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that Jesus was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! So Jesus told them this story: “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.’”** Next Jesus tells the parable of the lost son. God will keep graciously transforming humanity until every person is welcomed home, treated as an equal and everyone celebrates and rejoices.

When we exclude anyone, we hurt ourselves for we deprive ourselves of their gifts. When we exclude anyone, we have a smaller perception of God for each person reveals a unique facet of God.

When I went to Niger, I gave some of my time and money through Remember Niger. I received joy, gratitude, and unity. I was inspired by the way rich and poor came together enjoying fellowship as they ate their evening meals together. I learned deeper gratitude. By United States standards they had little. They were grateful for everything. They freely, generously shared. Their smiles and joy were uplifting. They expanded my perception of God's joy. Life is more abundant the more we come together.

Jesus has made it clear that everyone is beloved by God. All are included there is no difference in the value of a person based on skin color, or language, or gender, or wealth, or education, or beauty or sinfulness, or religion or a thousand other attributes by which we judge each other.

Who is the most excluded group in the United States today? How will you speak up for them, advocate for them, befriend them, invite them into community and celebrate with them over every barrier that is eliminated.

Exploring scripture, one finds that Jesus healed and welcomed back into community every outcast group and person. Jesus never even gave up on the group he corrected the most, the regular worshipers and religious leaders, who excluded some people. Jesus healed and welcomed them.

When we examine how Jesus treated women, we see how Jesus healed and welcomed all people, for women were the lowest and most excluded people in Jesus' day. A Jewish man was to pray daily, "Praise be God that He has not created me a woman." Jesus spoke with women, taught women, healed women and welcomed women into community. Jesus proclaimed that women were equal in the covenant made with Sarah and Abraham. Although the male dominate society did their best to scrub women from the Bible, if you read carefully you can perceive how the authors of scripture subtly proclaimed their equal status. There are numerous indications of women disciples. The first is Mary the mother of Jesus. God did not follow religious law. God did not ask for permission to speak to Mary or permission from Mary's Father or permission from Joseph. God speaks directly to Mary and calls her as a disciple to bring Jesus into the world. Mary was young, poor, and powerless Luke told how Jesus was journeying from village to village, preaching and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. **Luke 8:1-2 "Jesus took twelve disciples with him, along with some women"** Mark proclaims **Mark 15:41 "Some women were there, watching from a distance, including Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome. They had been followers of Jesus and had cared for Jesus while he was in Galilee. Many other women who had come with Jesus to Jerusalem were also there.** Jesus' first appearance was to a woman. It was the women who were the first to proclaim Jesus' resurrection. All of this is an astounding considering women were not to leave the household, not to learn scripture, not to be disciples. Luke writes. **Acts 18:18 "Then Paul set sail for Syria, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him."** The culture demanded that when naming a husband and wife, the male name always comes before the female. Priscilla is named five times before her husband Aquila. Some people consider Hebrews to be the fifth gospel. Some people believe that Hebrews was written by Priscilla. We simply do not know who wrote Hebrews and several books of the Bible.

Often when one hears stewardship they think of money, which is a part of stewardship. Stewardship is how we utilize all that God gives to us. God gives us speech. Are you a good steward of your speech? Do you honor all people? Do your words proclaim equality for everyone? God is grandeur than male and female. Perhaps you noticed that I try to proclaim gender equality using female, male and gender neutral words for God. I share quotes from female and male scholars, thinkers, and theologians. I share parables where all genders teach truth. Do you encourage, affirm, and celebrate all people equally, all colors, all genders, all cultures? Do you have sayings or stories that elevate certain people above others? A good steward uses their words to affirm the goodness and equality of all people.

Are you a good steward of your vote? Voting for candidates that promote love, hope, unity, honesty, and freedom. Since God has created all people equal and is transforming humanity to be one loving community where all are equal, enjoying abundant life then our leaders at all levels, political, business, academic, scientific should have equal representation. People of color, women and minorities should be voted and promoted into more positions.

When someone supports Remember Niger, they are helping create equality and abundant life for all. Niger is one of the poorest countries. Girls are often denied access to education. Remember Niger provides education, lunch and medical care for girls, boys, and those with physical and mental challenges. Remember Niger empowers local people, helping them establish and expand education for all. Education is a key to a future when all enjoy equality and abundant life. You can support Remember Niger Virtual Rally now through October 25. Amen