

Inclusion.

That's what this week's Bible reading are all about.

God doesn't discriminate based on what color our skin is, or what gender we are, or what language we speak, or which political party we agree with. *Everyone* is welcome to be part of the church community.

Two thousand years ago, when the church was first getting started, there were a lot of questions about what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. Remember, Jesus and his disciples were Jewish. They had different traditions and customs than the other cultures around them. So when people who were not Jewish started converting to Christianity, the question became, how Jewish do you have to be in order to follow Jesus?

Which parts of Judaism are still necessary, and which parts can be overlooked in light of the saving work of Jesus?

The answer is, it doesn't matter. God doesn't care whether you follow all of the cultural laws or none of them. All that matters is that you're following Jesus.

Take Peter and Paul, the biggest names in the early church. Peter basically ran the church in Jerusalem, and Paul went around the rest of the Roman Empire starting churches in lots of different cities.

Peter and Paul didn't get along very well. The Bible tells stories about the two of them disagreeing on important things

– it sounds like they actually weren't even on speaking terms for a while!

But Peter and Paul agree on this: they both want what's best for the church. And they agree that the best thing for the church is to let people be a part of it.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that even uncircumcised people should be baptized.

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (5:6, 14 NRSV)

Peter says the same thing in the book of Acts:

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (10:47 NRSV)

Here's why this is such a big deal.

Circumcision is the physical sign that Jewish men belong to God. It's a sign of the promise that God made to the people thousands of years ago, that God would care for them and save them from danger. When a boy is circumcised, it's basically a way for him to follow through on his end of the covenant, the promise, that God made with Abraham and the Israelites many years before.

Circumcision in ancient Judaism was kind of like baptism in the church today. It was an entry rite into the community – it was a way to physically show that a person believed in God’s promise. So the question that the Jesus-followers had was, do you have to go through the entry rite to become Jewish before you can go through the entry rite to become Christian.

Peter and Paul both say, no.

You can be a follower of God without the outward sign of circumcision.

It’s OK to baptize people who are not Jewish.

We can welcome *everyone* into our faith community.

Both Acts and Galatians state that nothing we can do will change our inclusion into God’s family. Peter and Paul tell us that God’s grace makes us worthy of being part of the Christian community. We’re like those non-Jewish men who showed up to be baptized two thousand years ago. At first people weren’t sure whether they could be welcomed unless they first went through all the right actions, like circumcision.

But the Bible tells us that our actions are not important. We are part of the family of God through the actions of the Holy Spirit, not through our own personal righteousness in following the law. Our only response is to be welcoming and inclusive – just like God is welcoming and inclusive to each one of us.

The next question then becomes: now that Jesus has come, what do we do with the law? The Hebrew Scriptures are filled

with rules and regulations that were supposed to keep the people of God separate and distinct from the other cultures around them. Circumcision was one of those laws. By following all of the laws, people thought that they were growing in relationship with God. But today we hear differently.

A former Luther Seminary professor puts it this way:

*“Basically... the law is a babysitter. Whatever else the law might have been good for, it was never meant to bring anyone into a right relationship with God.*

*The law does not make things new. God makes things new. The law keeps the refrigerator from being raided before the party.”*

Mary Hinkle Shore, on [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org)

To stretch the analogy a little more, you could say that Jesus coming to the world is what started the party. We can celebrate! The law doesn't stop existing. There are still rules, but now that the the guest of honor has arrived, you can go ahead and take the cake out of the refrigerator.

Let me describe it another way.

The law is what proves to the world that we believe in God. So circumcision, and all those other laws in the Old Testament, are ways that the world can judge how faithful we are as Christians.

But God doesn't judge us that way. God already welcomes us into the Christian family. If we follow those Old Testament laws, according to God, that's just icing on the cake. It's not the most important part of our faith, it's just a nice bonus.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that we need to love one another, just as Jesus loved us. Jesus isn't just talking about a warm fuzzy feeling that we have towards other people. Jesus is saying, I love you just the way you are. It doesn't matter where you've come from or what you've been through, what language you speak or what gender you claim – you are important to me, Jesus says, and I love you.

And Jesus says to us, love other people in this way. Welcome all people into the community. Don't judge. Don't think you're better than anyone else. Treat everyone as equals. We are all children of God, and we are all welcomed into God's family.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.