**From Exile to Home: Grace in the Neighbourhood**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**Easter 6, May 21, 2017**

Galatians 1: 13-17, 2: 11-21 Russell Mitchell-Walker

[Jonathon Brooks](http://www.pastahj.com) grew up in Englewood, in the south side of Chicago, everyone knew him as J. So when he came back to the neighbourhood as their pastor, he become known as Pastah J. Englewood is known as a place you drive through, not a place you go to. A common narrative in the community was to describe it as a war zone and a place of racial tension. People of Englewood are there because they have nowhere else to go, nowhere else they want to be, or no way to get out. Jonathon was a speaker at the Inhabit conference I went to in Seattle about being church in the neighbourhood – the New Parish. In being called to pastor back in his neighbourhood, Pastah J decided to move back to the neighbourhood. It felt like exile, having to go back. Most people there are working to get out of it. So he described how under cover of night he moved with blankets over televisions and other expensive equipment so people couldn’t see what they had, for fear of being robbed. He told his two girls to only play in the fenced back yard because it wasn’t safe on the street. He knew the neighbourhood and knew the risks and dangers. So they kept pretty much to themselves. He had left the hood, and made it, and came back with understandings, assumptions and opinions about those who were still there ad excluded them from their life.

In our scripture reading today, some of the followers of Jesus were divided because of the assumptions, understandings and opinions they had about the gentiles who were becoming baptized in increasing numbers. Some believed that they needed to be circumcized and follow the Jewish law. Others, led by Paul believed that they did not, that they are justified in Christ and included by God’s grace not by works or the law. Paul’s conversion helped him understand how all are included in God’s love in Christ and there that following the law or not following the law would make them any more or less belonging, accepted, or loved by God. Indeed, Mary Hinkle Shore, in the [Working Preacher](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3043) commentary suggests that we replace the word *justified* in this passage with beloved. Here how it changes our understanding as justified, is not a word we use much.

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16yet we know that a person belongs not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might belong by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will belong by the works of the law. 17But if, in our effort to belong in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! 18But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. 19For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; 20and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.21I do not nullify the grace of God; for if belonging comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Does that make the message easier to understand? We are loved and accepted, we belong because of our faith and belief in Christ.

Peter understood this too, but Paul got upset with him for not living this out fully. In Antioch where he was, he was eating with Gentiles and welcomed them fully into the community. In Jewish law this would make a Jewish person unclean. So when Jewish leaders and followers of Jesus who were in the camp of following the law and believed the Gentiles needed to follow the law as well and be circumsized, came to visit, Peter changed his behaviour and ate with only the Jews, forcing the Gentiles to eat by themselves. All of a sudden the Gentiles were second class citizens. Paul called out Peter for this hypocrisy. If we say all are welcome, then all are welcome all the time. Not just when it suits us or makes us comfortable. It is important to stand with those who we want to include and challenge the behaviours and attitudes of those who want to exclude them.

Who are the Gentiles for us today, in our church, community, social circles? Depending where we are or our context, some might say indigenous people, LGBT folk, immigrants, especially Muslims. For our exploration today, I want to suggest that those who are Spiritual but not Religious may be our equivalent Gentiles community. We may want to reach out to them and include them but what expectations do we have if we do? Do we expect them to come to church on Sunday morning and thus grow our church? Do we expect them to help us meet our budget? Do we expect them to come to our building for programs? Ministry to the neighbourhood and in the neighbourhood is more about being in the neighbourhood and finding out what God is doing there that we might join in on. Whatever we do in innovation and reaching out, may not bring more bums in the pews. That is not the primary goal, although it is great when it happens. The primary goal is being with and offering community and love where it is needed, whether that is through a program like the family dinners or a partnering with an organization in the community to meet a need. Pastah J has a quote on his [website](http://www.pastahj.com/neighbor): “Will you stop asking God what he wants you to do and begin asking him where he wants you to do it and with whom”.

Pastah J’s story continues with one night they were coming home from Bible study and they just got in the house when they heard shots ring out. He got the children and his wife downstairs and then went out to investigate what happened. The neighbour on one side, an older woman he had never talked to was there and she came over to him and said, ‘Pastor J are you alright? Is your wife Micha’ela and the girls Jasmine and Jade alright?, I know you were just coming back from Bible study because it’s Tuesday.’ He wondered how did this woman know our names and what we were doing? But he asked her if she knew what had happened. She didn’t but suggested he ask the neighbours on the other side. Now these neighbours were tough looking guys who were always out on the porch looking what he thought was suspicious. So he went over and asked them if they knew what happened. They did and shared that with him and also told a story that I don’t remember all of the details of as I didn’t take notes of it, but basically these guys told him about someone coming to the street causing trouble and they made sure he didn’t come back and do that again. They were looking out for the neighbourhood and keeping it safe. In that moment he realized the mistake he had made in shutting out himself from the neighbourhood. He realized that he wasn’t exiled there, he was home. From that point on he let his children play in the front yard and began engaging in conversation with the neighbourhood. He learned that there was no where for them to buy fresh produce so they established a fresh food coop at the church.

He shared with the following insights and challenges:

Stop talking about those you are concerned about and judging from the window and get out and engage with them to help them be the person you’d want to be.

When we seek the peace and welfare of the city I benefit

God has commanded us to love all the people, in all the places. Just as Paul did. Where does God want me to do it, not just what God wants me to do.

Where will the biggest impact be made for the community for me?

Where do I need to go to be the most uncomfortable.

What are the ‘gardens’ that need to be planted?

Do you know your neighbours? Do you know your neighbourhood? Who is your neighbour? What are the assets and hurts of your neighbourhood. These are the questions I want to be exploring myself and with you over the next year or so. Who are the gentiles in our community that we could be including or welcoming and what would that look like? May we embrace opportunities to learn about our community, and what God is calling us to do and where. May we live out Gods love in Christ, in our communities, each day, wherever we go.