

[1]

Last week, CNN broadcasted shocking news about sub-Saharan refugees being sold at a slave market in Libya. The video released by CNN undercover reporters showed two young men being auctioned off as farm workers. They were sold to buyers about \$400 (US) at undisclosed locations in Libya. On the video, about ten young men were sold off in 6-7 minutes.

Most victims were refugees from sub-Saharan African countries who were attempting to be smuggled into Europe through illegal brokers. The brokers have sold those people to slave markets to make more profit, and now the trade in human beings has become so normalised that people are being traded in public. The survivors say that there are at least nine slave markets in Libya.

I was shocked at the news; I couldn't believe it. Why are human beings cruel to other people? Why do people keep using violence and extortion of the weak, the marginalised, or the minority? These questions have been asked for a long time in human history.

[2]

Miroslav Volf has answered these questions theologically from a perspective of exclusion. He argues that human beings are self-centred, so are likely to exclude others rather than embrace them. To embrace others we should make space for them in our lives, and for this, we must de-centre ourselves first. However, almost everyone would like to be centre all the time, which means we try to exclude others, especially the weak and the alienated, consciously or unconsciously. Furthermore, we tend to rationalise those acts from our standpoint.

Volf categorises exclusion into three categories. The first is exclusion by elimination, such as in homicide, genocide, or deportation. What's interesting is that he claims that assimilation is the same exclusion as elimination because assimilation is a process for removing otherness.

The second is exclusion by dominating others; in this case the ruling class treats those who are alienated as a second-class citizen or slave, and exploits them. The last form of exclusion is indifference. This exclusion isn't implemented by violence or exploitation, but it is done silently in our society.

For example, being apathetic toward critical social issues like human rights and justice or the well-being of disabled people or asylum seekers in our community is another act of exclusion. Volf argues that harmful effects from indifference are bigger than those from anger.

Yes, exclusion is everywhere in our life in both major and minor ways. We can say that human history is the history of exclusion. The story of Cain and Abel is an example of that. You know, Cain and Abel were two sons of Adam and Eve, the first people created by God.

According to Genesis 4, Cain and Abel each brought an offering to God; God looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he didn't look with favour. Cain was furious, and killed his brother in the field, which was the first murder in human history. The bottom line is that this story is talking not only about fratricide, but also about exclusion.

This narrative shows how dangerous exclusion is. Cain was so jealous, that he excluded his brother from his life to stand in the centre. However, since his identity was constructed in comparison to Abel, even after killing his brother he would've found other persons with whom he would compare and eliminate again to find his excellence. However, the act of exclusion is like a black hole and can never satisfy us. Rather, in the end, like Cain, we would exclude ourselves from all relationships, and on top of that God would be removed too.

[3]

So, God hates the acts of exclusion; exclusion is one of the biggest sins because it kills not only others, but also us and even God. Today's first Bible reading, Ezekiel 34:11-24, contains God's response to exclusion. In the scripture, God compares his people to sheep and himself to their shepherd.

What's remarkable is that God divides his sheep into two groups, the fat sheep and the lean sheep. God says to the fat sheep as follows: “Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?” At this, the fat sheep are those who exclude and the lean sheep are the victims of exclusion.

Verse 20 shows God’s response to exclusion: “Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep.” Yes, God’s justice is the answer to exclusion. But, what we must not forget is that God’s justice isn’t based on his anger, but on his mercy on all human beings. God’s justice is loving justice.

The highlight of God’s loving justice was Jesus’ death on the cross. And the event of Jesus’ cross was also the climax of human beings’ exclusion. We Christians believe that God the Son was made man in order to embrace human beings unconditionally. Many theologians argue that Jesus’ incarnation was the core of God’s love for accepting people as they are.

However, people ignored and excluded Jesus, and finally crucified him on a cross. In the event of Jesus’ life and death, we can find the three forms of exclusion mentioned earlier. There was exclusion by looking down on Jesus due to his religious and educational background; there was exclusion by killing Jesus through an illegal process; and there was exclusion by silence and apathy to the unfairness of Jesus’ death sentence.

But, Jesus didn’t exclude them; rather, he embraced them and prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus didn’t remain as a victim being angry of injustice and unfairness. Instead, Jesus made a space for reconciliation by giving up his divinity and accepting humans’ sinfulness; he cut the vicious cycle of exclusion by forgiving the enemies.

[4]

At the beginning of today’s sermon, I asked a few questions like “Why are human beings cruel to other people? Why do people keep using violence and extortion to the weak, the marginalised, or the minority?” But, God’s response to exclusion, that is, his loving justice revealed through the event of Jesus’ death challenges us to ask a new and right question: “How should we respond to exclusion happening in our life as the followers of Jesus?”

The event of Jesus’ cross teaches us that we should cut the vicious cycle of exclusion by embracing and forgiving others rather than cursing and revenging them. We must also stop being indifferent to others’ suffering, because apathy is another exclusion.

G. Ridgway is an American serial killer. When he was sentenced to life imprisonment, the families of his victims were allowed to say something to him. Most family members resented and cursed him, which was very natural. But there was no change in his face while listening to them; there was no sign of regret or shame in his attitude.

Then, a father of a victim came forward and said to him with a quivering voice: “Mr. Ridgway. There are people here that hate you. I’m not one of them even you’ve made it difficult to live up to, but I believe and it is what God says to do and that’s to forgive you. You are forgiven.”

Surprisingly, his forgiveness made the cold-hearted murderer cry. I’m not sure why the killer cried and what it meant, but the certain thing is that the father forgiving the enemy didn’t submit to the violence of exclusion. He didn’t leave the murderer as an enemy in his life.

This story is an extreme instance, but it shows well how powerful forgiveness is. Lots of curses and angry words at that time were forgotten, but his forgiveness is still remembered and spread through those who are touched because forgiveness makes a miracle of embracing us all.

[5]

Sisters and brothers,

The way of the cross is very uncomfortable in this world full of violence and exclusion; embrace and forgiveness are too hard to live out in our reality. But, remember that we were called to eliminate the vicious cycle of exclusion through forgiveness and embrace. Amen.