

8-13-2023

Jesus is the God of AND

I was listening to a podcast the other day and one of the people on the podcast was saying that he had recently begun challenging himself to stop saying the word BUT and instead change it to AND. He is an enneagram SIX, and so am I. For those of you who know what the enneagram is, you know that a SIX is often someone who asks a lot of questions. We ask questions because we seek to understand, but we also look for possible pitfalls or problems that might happen in any given situation.

When I ask questions or bring up issues with an idea, I think I am just fleshing out the ideas. While this sounds like a good idea (especially to me since it is something I do quite frequently), it sometimes shuts other people down, or closes off other possibilities without giving them a chance. In reality what I am doing by asking these questions is not always very productive. When I do this I am actually problem seeking rather than problem solving. It is often said that what you seek, you will find. So if you are always looking for the worst case scenario or looking for the ways that something WON'T work, that is what you will find. On the contrary, if you are looking for solutions, and possibilities, and the ways to make things work, you will find that as well.

As a problem seeker, I can point out errors and places where things can go wrong, find excuses, and complain about a situation. Not very helpful. People who question and doubt and troubleshoot ideas are sometimes called the devil's advocate. I don't want to be the devil's advocate, I want to be Jesus' advocate. I want to switch my problem seeking into problem solving.

As a problem solver, I would be trying to turn around those issues or problems I find in a situation, and instead try to find solutions, new ideas, new ways of addressing concerns, instead of just complaining about them. I want to switch my doubting and limiting that the word

Many of you know that I am fluent in American Sign Language. I would like to teach you the signs for 2 words. The first word is BUT. To make the sign for the word BUT, you hold up only your pointer fingers, cross them in front of you and then draw them apart. When looking up the definition of the word BUT, it is defined by Merriam Webster as “with the exception of or on the contrary to.” BUT pulls people apart. It separates and points out differences, challenges and limitations. I want to do this, BUT... these are all the reasons that I cannot or will not be able to do it. BUT keeps people out, excludes people. I want to join the choir, BUT I can't sing.

Now let's make the sign for the word AND. Hold your hand slightly open in front of you and then pull it together. AND is defined as “connection or addition or joining.” AND is about including and adding to. I want to do this, AND that. AND provides opportunity. I want to make music in church, AND I joined the bell choir.

In a practical sense, BUT put limits or parameters on something, while AND includes and takes down boundaries. With those definitions in mind, I think of Jesus as the God of AND.

Looking at today's passage, there are a few ways that Jesus uses the power of AND. First the disciples have gone out on the boat on a stormy night AND Jesus has gone off by himself to pray - a beautiful practice that he does quite frequently. He is in community and prays with others, AND he restores himself by praying to God alone. This is a very important practice we all should include. Being in community is great. Being here on Sunday is great. AND we need to have our own practices outside of church. We need to have our own quiet time praying to, talking to AND listening to God.

After he is done praying, Jesus is alone on the shore while the disciples are quite a way out to sea. He sees them but doesn't think, “they are on the boat, BUT I am on land.” Rather he sees the boat at

what is described as “a considerable distance from the land” AND walks out to greet them. While I don’t encourage us to try walking on water, unless Jesus is there right in front of you to catch you, water is not the only thing that separates us from each other. When we see other people already in conversation, how often do we approach? How often do we make an excuse NOT to approach? I want to join their conversation, BUT I don’t know them that well. I want to be included in that activity BUT I only know one person going. How often do we dismiss other people simply because they are different or unfamiliar or just “a considerable distance from us” literally or figuratively.

Even today in fellowship after church, we may see a group of people standing together talking. I might want to join their conversation BUT there are so many excuses not to. Jesus sees those distances between us, he sees those excuses AND he encourages us to close that gap, walk that distance, dismiss those excuses.

Next, seeing Jesus walking out on the water scares the disciples. AND Jesus reassures them. Jesus knows that the unfamiliar and the unexpected can be scary. AND he does it anyway. AND he is there in the face of those things that scare us. AND he reassures us just as he did his disciples.

Then Peter decides that he wants to go to Jesus on the water. Jesus already knows what is going to happen. He doesn’t say to Peter, “BUT Peter, you don’t have enough faith to walk on water.” Instead he says, “Come.”

We know what happens next:

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. BUT when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

In the Message translation, the next line says "Jesus didn't hesitate." Jesus knows our hearts, our intentions, our doubts, and our mistakes. AND he loves us anyway. AND he doesn't hesitate to be there each and every time we fall.

This is not the only time Jesus does this. This is not the only story that is representative of Jesus as the God of AND. The New Testament is full of stories of Jesus AND. Jesus with Jews AND Gentiles. Jesus with religious leaders AND sinners. With free men AND slaves. With men, AND women.

Jesus AND his healing ways.

Jesus sees the woman at the well AND he talks to her. Offering her living water and telling her that he is the messiah.

Jesus sees Zacheaus sitting in the tree AND calls him down to have dinner with him, offering him salvation.

Jesus sees the leper AND touches him, healing him.

Jesus is out walking with his disciples, when someone touches his clothing he knows his power has been discharged. He stops AND calls to the hemorrhaging woman. Not to shame her. Not to call her out. Rather to include her, publicly calling her daughter and recognizing her faith.

Jesus knows that women were not valued in the culture he is living in AND he includes them in his ministry.

Jesus loves Lazareth. Knows he has died. Weeps for him. AND brings him back to life.

Jesus knows that the religious leaders are watching him AND he continues to heal on the sabbath.

Jesus knows Peter. He knows he will doubt. He knows Peter will deny Jesus 3 times. He knows Peter will be scared and run away. AND he builds his church on Peter.

Jesus knows us. He knows me. He knows each and every one of you. He knows we will doubt. He knows we may be scared and turn away. AND he trusts us to be his church, to be his people.

Jesus is the God of AND. The God of inclusion. The God of opportunity. The God of healing AND helping AND loving.

Jesus shows us how to be his people, the people of AND. People of inclusion. People of addition. Jesus wants us to be people of faith AND people living in a secular world. Jesus shows us how to be welcoming to others, those who look like us, act like us and believe like us, AND those who don't.

Jesus shows us how to pray in community AND how to have a private faith practice. He shows us how to close that considerable difference between us AND other people. Jesus is always there to assuage our fears AND he never hesitates when we falter, when we fall.

When I try to shift my thoughts from BUT to AND, I am trying to follow Jesus's example of love AND inclusion. I am trying to shift my impulse to be a problem seeker, to becoming a problem solver. I am trying NOT to see the limitations, excuses and exclusions to a situation, AND instead see the opportunities, solutions and inclusions.

For most of my life, I have attended church every Sunday, even during college and even when I was away on my study abroad in Australia, BUT I didn't work on my individual relationship with Jesus outside of Sunday. Now I still seek out and love Sunday services and being part of a bigger faith community, AND I also read and study the Bible on my own. I journal and work on my personal relationship with Jesus daily.

Now when I see people who are "a considerable distance away," from me either literally or figuratively, I try to close that gap, cross that bridge, join that conversation. I try to do things that are scary or uncomfortable. I don't do it all well or right. I don't have to. Jesus is there no matter what.

Jesus tells me to “come,” even when he knows I might fail or fall. In the past I might have given Jesus the list of excuses as to why I couldn’t do that or try that or succeed at that. I might have pointed out all of the problems I have found. Now I try to remember that with Jesus, I can try. I can look for solutions or suggestions. I still might fall or fail. My ideas or solutions might not work. People might not accept my ideas, or me. AND I also know that Jesus is right there with me, never hesitating to catch me. And that these experiences are the AND that make my life a life of inclusion and opportunity.

Jesus shows us his example of living in this fallen world AND living for eternal life. He gives us His example of serving our faith community AND developing our private relationship with Him. I try to take the steps necessary to understand differences AND walk with others. I try to live as a good and faithful servant, AND know that Jesus never hesitates to forgive my mistakes and my shortcomings.

I try to honor God the Creator, Jesus the Savior, AND the Holy Ghost.

As we leave here today Lord, help us to remember to include, to add to say yes AND. Let us love our community of believers here today AND those who are a considerable distance from us. Let us continue to gather together in your holy name, AND discover who you are outside of church. Let us remember Lord, that it is You who did both the making AND the saving. AND let us live secure in the knowledge that we are your children forever.

In your holy name we pray.

Amen

