

“Inies and Outies”

Two of today’s scripture readings speak to a critical issue within any community but particularly the Church—who is in and who is out. We can see from these readings that this is nothing new to the Church or any formal religious organization. Most have rules about who will be accepted as a member of the congregation or who can take part in their most holy practices. In Christian traditions there are restrictions on who can receive Holy Communion, who can bless the sacrament, who can perform baptisms and marriages. The point is good order and protecting the sacred from those who are callous or have bad intentions.

The Episcopal Church is noted for its signs that are often seen at the outskirts of towns along with the signs for civic or fraternal organizations. It is the blue and white sign with the Episcopal Shield. At the top is the name of the local parish. At the bottom of the sign, it reads “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.” It is a generous sentiment, but sadly the Episcopal Church has a reputation for being exclusive. We are the church of the well-educated, well-heeled, and elite. I do not think that is true of many parishes including ours, but the stigma holds in the popular culture.

We Episcopalians do not do ourselves any good by some of our attitudes and practices. I remember “church shopping” in Richmond Virginia and the variety of experiences I had. In one parish when it came time to pass the Peace the people in the pews around me ignored me. Not even a nod much less a handshake. Another parish was the opposite so much so that I felt singled out for attention. People came from every pew to offer the peace. It was so over the top I was uncomfortable. The next church treated me like a regular person at the passing of the Peace, but in order to enter the coffee hour I had to submit to questioning and the giving of personal information. I think we have found a happy medium here, but I would be curious to know what visitors honestly think.

While this might be looked at as sad, misguided, or clumsy there is one rule that I find egregious. That is the one that denies Holy Communion to anyone who is not baptized. While we are not as exclusive as some other Christian traditions we still deny the most precious sacraments to those who are not insiders. As far as I know none of the disciples baptized yet Jesus included them in the Last Supper, which is the model for Holy Communion. I do not think that those who are baptized have some special knowledge about the meaning of Holy Communion that others do not have. I believe that my job and the job of all of us is to welcome all those on a spiritual journey and seeking spiritual food to the table of the Lord. We are to welcome people to this table not keep them away from it.

The scriptures today deal with similarly extreme issues of being inside or outside. In the reading from the Book of Numbers Moses complains to YHWH that he is unable deal with the whining and weeping of the people. He says to God, “I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once...”¹ YHWH responds by telling Moses to select seventy elders of the people and bring them to the Tent of Meeting. Once they are gathered YHWH takes some of the spirit that was on Moses and puts it on the elders. Immediately they began to prophesy. However, there was a problem. Two of the elders, Eldad and Medad, did not show up. I suppose they were functioning on Middleburg time. But even though they did not show up to the Tent of Meeting they

¹ Numbers 11:14-15a NRSVUE

still prophesied like the other sixty-eight. What is more, they prophesied not at the Tent of Meeting but in the camp among those not anointed by the spirit.

One young man found this offensive and reported it to Moses. Joshua, who will lead the Hebrews when they cross into the Promised Land, implores Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying. These two did not follow the rules. They did not show up at the Tent of Meeting and they are prophesying amongst the common folk and not the other elders. Moses pushes back saying “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” Moses in his wisdom welcomes their prophecy. Rather than keeping the spirit and prophecy exclusive to a small group he wants it on all people. I do not know if a whole nation of prophets would be easier for Moses to manage, but perhaps in his view at least they would all be speaking God’s word instead of whining about food.

Jesus encounters a similar problem with his disciples. John, one of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples, comes to him complaining that there is a man healing people in Jesus’ name. John goes so far as to say, “...we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” Can you imagine stopping someone from healing the sick because they are not one of a select group?² John thinks that healing in Jesus’ name is exclusive to the little group of twelve. I must wonder if the disciples were also acting out of jealousy since they were unable to heal a child a few verses earlier.³ Like Moses Jesus pushes back saying “Do not stop him; ... Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Jesus goes on to rebuke the disciples more aggressively. Jesus’s speech is so horrifying and brutal that we know he was terribly angry. These words are like no other in the Gospel. He tells them and us that we should not put a stumbling block before any of the little ones (which could mean children and/or new believers). If we hinder or block these little ones from believing we might as well have tied a millstone around our necks and been thrown into the sea (the Mafia had nothing on Jesus’ imagination). He adds if our hand of foot causes us to sin cut it off and if our eye causes us to sin then cut it out. We are better off lame or blind than spending eternity in “hell⁴ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.” It is not a pleasant picture.

Now, I do not think that Jesus meant for us to main ourselves. Rather he is once again using hyperbole to impress upon us the importance of caring for our souls and the souls of others. We have a responsibility to welcome people. Whether they are latecomers to the meeting or people whose beliefs may not match ours perfectly. Let us welcome all people in all guises knowing that as it is written in the Letter to the Hebrews that by doing so “some have entertained angels unawares.”⁵

² To see a more contemporary example of this behavior I recommend the movie “Patch Adams.”

³ Mark 9:14-29

⁴ The word Jesus uses is *Gehenna* which was the actual rubbish dump outside of Jerusalem that was always on fire burning up the refuse of the city.

⁵ Hebrews 13:2 KJV