

A Child of God

Our readings today ask us to ponder yet again that age old question that is so troubling to so many people: "Who's in and who's out?"

It's not a new problem and it's not a new question.

Churches over the last twenty plus years have struggled with the question when it comes to who to ordain as priests and bishops: can it be women, must it be only heterosexuals?

As Election Day mercifully approaches, you can't miss the saturation coverage about Mr. Romney's comments concerning the 47% of Americans who, in his view, are dependent victims who will never support him.

An angry Coptic Christian living in California makes an intentionally vicious video about the prophet Mohammed and some people on the other side of the world erupt with unjustifiable mayhem to protest the video.

Turn on the talk radio dial and you'll here screeds all afternoon about how "they" are unfit, evil, traitorous and a danger to human civilization.

Who's in and who's out is a question we struggle with every single day; often without satisfactory answers.

I read last week that the Vatican is convening a gathering of bishops to determine when Christians of differing denominations are allowed to pray together!

Silly me, my answer of "always" is apparently way off the mark.

Our first reading today shows what an ancient problem this is: who's in and who's out?

When two fellows who didn't make it to the initiation ceremony still get the gift of prophesy, it drives Joshua, the best and the brightest of Israel's leaders, crazy.

Joshua is on the verge of taking over from Moses as the leader of the Hebrew people.

Joshua is the man ready to lead his people into the long promised but much delayed holy land.

Yet Joshua, for all of his wisdom, can't fathom a God who passes out gifts not only to insiders, but to outsiders as well.

That sense of outrage that those outside the fold get good things from God is exactly what the disciples are freaking out about today.

Just a couple of weeks ago, these same disciples were confronted by a demon they couldn't get rid of – yet today they come fuming to Jesus about some **outsider** who is kicking out devils right and left in Jesus' name – they are outraged because he isn't part of the club.

And once again, Jesus teaches them that this new community is about breaking down walls, not building them up.

It has Jesus reminding them that someday, they will rely on the kindness of these same outsiders for something as simple as a cold cup of water.

After reminding them of this, Jesus turns serious.

Very serious.

The old desert fathers and mothers, monks in the early church who left everything behind to follow the Lord; they had a saying: "Pay attention to yourself."

I have a feeling they got that saying from the stern lesson Jesus insists upon today.

Today, Jesus looks his disciples square in the eye and says, in no uncertain terms, don't worry about what others are up to, or how they choose to understand God, or what path they are taking; 'Pay attention to *yourself!*'

He warns them that just as he comes in gentleness, without breaking the bruised reed, without quenching the smoldering wick, just so, the disciples – you and I – need to be particularly slow to judge -- and quick to understand those who don't come from the same places we come from.

In other words, leave judgment to God and get going with the assigned task of washing each other's feet.

So serious is Jesus about this that he talks about amputating hands and gouging out eyes; not as literal instructions -- but to get our attention; to have us focus on what it means to live this new life in the kingdom of God.

It means: "Pay attention to yourself," and leave the judging to God.

The "little ones" Jesus is so protective of may include children, but it is probably aimed mostly at those who are new to the faith – people who are curious and hungry and in need of what the Lord

has to offer – and who are vulnerable, perhaps even a little scared, and cautious.

To people such as these, Jesus says to the disciples, says to us, be welcoming, be gracious, be hospitable.

It can make all the difference in the world.

We all know the story of the new person who shows up at a Sunday mass; nervous, wondering, anxious.

They take a seat, only to have an old timer say: “That’s where I sit!”

Who’s in and who’s out is a question we Christians ought to keep front and center at all times.

Because with God, through Jesus, I’m likely to find Jesus on the opposite side of whatever line I may draw.

That’s because Jesus is always on the hunt for the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son and daughter.

And it’s hard to miss the fact that it’s the most unlikely people who keep showing up with faith: Roman soldiers and adulterous women and desperate tax collectors.

In Hawaii, something we like to know about each other is what high school you went to.

In my lawyer days, that was always asked when we were picking a jury.

True or not, lots of folks seem to think that where you went to high school says a lot about who you are today.

In the south, the question isn't high schools but heritage: "Who's your daddy" is the question often asked as people try to size up whether you're on the inside or outside.

Preston sent to Arleen and me a story that seems to capture where Jesus is coming from with us today, from the unique perspective of our southern brothers and sisters....

It's the true story of a seminary professor who was vacationing with his wife in Tennessee.

One morning, they are eating breakfast at a little restaurant, ready to enjoy a quiet, family meal.

While they are waiting for their food, they notice a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting with the guests.

The professor leans over and whispers to his wife, 'I hope he doesn't come over here.'

But sure enough, the man does come over to their table.

"Where are you folks from?" he asks.

"Oklahoma," they answer.

"Great to have you here in Tennessee," the stranger says.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I teach at a seminary," the professor replies.

"Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach, do you?"

Well, I've got a really great story for you.”

And with that, the gentleman pulls up a chair and sits down at the table with the couple.

Now the professor is groaning to himself, thinking: “Great... just what I need.... another preacher story!”

The man starts, “See that mountain over there? (pointing out the restaurant window).

Not far from the base of that mountain, there was a boy born to an unwed mother.

He had a hard time growing up, because every place he went, he was always asked the same question, 'Hey boy, who's your daddy?'

Whether he was at school, in the grocery store or drug store, people would ask the same question, 'Who's your daddy?'

He would hide at recess and lunchtime from other students.

He would avoid going in to stores because that question hurt him so bad.

'When he was about 12, a new preacher came to his church.

He would always go in late and slip out early to avoid hearing the question, 'Who's your daddy?'

But one day he got caught and had to walk out with the crowd.

Just as he got to the back door, the new preacher, not knowing anything about him, put his hand on his shoulder and asked him, 'Son, who's your daddy?'

Well, the whole church got deathly quiet.

He could feel every eye looking at him.

Now everyone would finally know the answer to the question, 'Who's your daddy?'

This new preacher, though, sensing the situation around him and using discernment that only the Holy Spirit can give, says this to that scared little boy.

'Wait a minute! I know who you are! I see the family resemblance as clear as day: You are a child of God!'

With that he patted the boy on his shoulder and said, 'Boy, you've got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.'

'With that, the boy smiled for the first time in a long time and walked out the door a changed person.

He was never the same again.

Whenever anybody asked him, 'Who's your Daddy?' he'd tell them, 'I'm a child of God.'

The distinguished gentleman got up from the table and said, 'Isn't that a great story?'

The professor agreed, it really was a great story!

As the man turned to leave, he said, 'You know, if that new preacher hadn't told me that I was one of God's children, I probably never would have amounted to anything!'

And he walked away...

The professor and his wife were stunned.

He called the waitress over and asked her, 'Do you know who that man is -- the one who just left who was sitting at our table?'

The waitress grinned and said, 'Of course. Everybody here knows him.'

That's Ben Hooper.

He's the governor of our state!"

If we can see that everyone who walks through these doors is a child of God, then we will have salt *in* ourselves,

If we can live out an attitude of gratitude for all of the blessings that we receive, then we will have salt *among* ourselves

And if we can take this grateful hospitality out of these doors and into the wider world, then we will know peace.

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