

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.

This past week has seen a major candidate for national office declare that a Muslim cannot serve as president and, while he later tried to walk the statement back somewhat, it is a good indicator that "us vs. them" is alive and well in our country.

But it's not only in the political arena where these difficulties arise.

With the visit by Pope Francis, the struggles of our Roman brothers with issues like the ordination of women, the consequences of divorce, and issues of gay relationships are front and center.

Not that we Anglicans can take a pass on these debates.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is calling for a big meeting early next year to loosen the ties between our far flung communion; because of seemingly insurmountable disagreements over who's in and who's out.....involving many of the same issues the Romans are wrestling with.

Who's in and who's out?

Our older testament reading shows what an ancient problem this is.

When two fellows who don't make it to the initiation ceremony still get the gift of prophesy, Joshua, the best and the brightest of Israel's leaders, goes nuts!

Joshua, second in command to Moses, who's ready to lead his people into the long promised but much delayed holy land, Joshua, for all of his wisdom, can't fathom a God who passes out gifts not just to insiders, but to outsiders too.

Protecting our turf is in our DNA.

The disciples of Jesus are freaking out too today, over exactly the same thing!

Just a couple of weeks ago, they faced a demon they couldn't get rid of — yet today they are fuming about some outsider who is kicking out devils right and left in Jesus' name - fuming, because he isn't part of the club.

And once again, Jesus pulls them in close, reminding them yet again that this new community is about breaking down walls, not building them up.

Jesus reminds them yet again that someday, they will rely on the kindness of outsiders for something as simple as a cold cup of water.

After reminding them of this, Jesus gets serious.

Very serious.

The old desert fathers and mothers, monks in the early church who left everything behind to follow the Lord; said this:

"Pay attention to yourself."

I have a feeling they got that saying from today's gospel.

Today, Jesus looks his disciples square in the eye and says, point blank, don't worry about what others are up to, or how they choose to understand God; '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 very 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, we've got feet to wash!

We know he's serious because he's talking about amputating hands and gouging out eyes; where a hand represents self-righteous pride and an eye represents envy and fear: tear them out! cut them off!

"Pay attention to yourself!," and leave the judging to God.

And these "little ones" whom Jesus is so protective of, while it may include children, is probably aimed mostly at those who are on the receiving end of the Moral Majority's contempt: the immigrant, the queer, the addict.

To people such as these, Jesus says, be welcoming, be gracious, be hospitable.

It can make all the difference in the world.

Who's in and who's out is a question we Christians are wise to keep front and center everyday.

Because Jesus is usually on the other side of whatever line I may draw.

Because Jesus is always on the hunt for the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost daughter or son.

And so it's the most unlikely people who keep showing up with faith: Roman soldiers and adulterous women and desperate tax collectors, and queers and immigrants and addicts.

In Hawaii, a big question is what high school you went to.

In my lawyer days, that was a favorite question during jury selection.

True or not, folks seem to think that where you went to high school says a lot about who you are today, sometimes defining whether you're an insider or an outsider.

In the south, the question isn't high schools but heritage:

"Who's your daddy" is the question often asked as people size up whether you're on the inside or outside.

A seminary professor who was vacationing in Tennessee tells this story...

One morning, he and his wife are eating a quiet breakfast at a little restaurant.

There's a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting with the guests.

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

But sure enough, he does.

"Where're you folks from?" he asks.

"Oklahoma," they answer.

"Welcome to Tennessee," the stranger says.

"What do you do for a living?"

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

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

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

And with that, he pulls up a chair, sits down at the table with the couple, and 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?'

Everywhere he went, people asked the same question, 'Who's your daddy?'

He hid at recess and lunchtime from other students.

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

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

The boy went to church late and slipped out early to avoid hearing the question, 'Who's your daddy?'

But one day he gets caught and has to walk out with the crowd.

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

Well, the whole church is real quiet.

Every eye is looking at him.

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

This new preacher, though, sensing the situation around him and with insight 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 says, 'Boy, you've got a great inheritance.

Go and claim it.'

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

He's never the same again.

Whenever anybody asks him, 'Who's your Daddy?' he tells 'em, 'I'm a child of God.'

The distinguished gentleman says, 'Isn't that a great story?'

The professor agrees, it really is a great story!

As the man turns to leave, he says, '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 walks away...

The professor and his wife sit, stunned.

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

The waitress grins and says, 'Of course.

That's Ben Hooper.

He's our governor!'"

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, and share those blessings with folks who will never walk through these doors, then we will have salt among ourselves.

And if we can accept that in Jesus there are no longer any outsiders, then we shall be at peace.

Thanks be to God!

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