

Insiders and Outsiders

I know you've heard more than a few sermons from this pulpit, and from this preacher, about insiders and outsiders.

Some of you may start calling me "One Note Nick."

But don't blame me!

Blame Jesus!

He's practically obsessed with the topic, or more to the point, WE'RE obsessed with the topic and Jesus is determined to break us free from what is a lousy and destructive habit: our habit of deciding who's in and who's out.

It's a habit that's as fresh as today's headlines and as ancient as Moses himself.

It's there in our first reading this morning!

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, wise Joshua, can not fathom a God who passes out gifts not just to insiders, but to outsiders too.

Protecting our turf, and our privileges, it's 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're 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 crucial 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.

We are to give folks the benefit of the doubt, and if they're not against us, well, by golly, let's assume they're on our side!

In other words, leave judgment to God ... we've got feet to wash!

We know Jesus is serious because he's talking about amputating hands and gouging out eyes; not literally of course, but asking us to see in the hand the grasping of self-righteous pride and in the eye, envy and fear.

Cut them off!

Tear them out!

"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.

It makes 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 café.

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 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 gets 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 sits back, '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 prob'ly 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 was our governor!'" Craddock.

If we can see that everyone who walks through these doors is a child of God, 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 strangers, but only friends whom we haven't yet met, then ... we shall be at peace.

+amen