

Who Is In And Who Is Out?

You can't pick up a newspaper or turn on the TV, it seems, without bumping into the problems our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters are having. The scandal of child abuse has spread pretty much across the globe. What was thought to be a problem for the church in America is now seen as a problem within the church itself.

We Episcopalians, who are part of the Anglican community throughout the world, face our share of problems as well. The ordination of homosexual persons and of women as bishops has caused a serious rift in relations between those in the Anglican community.

The challenge faced by good people on all sides of these dilemmas is this:

For our Roman brothers and sisters, should their priests be allowed to marry? Should their bishops be selected with greater input from the people? Is there a need to redefine the relationship between clergy and the people of God? In short, has the Roman church become defined by "insiders", like the clergy, and "outsiders", like the folks in the pew?

And for us, the questions are whether we shall accept or reject those whose sexuality is different from the majority, different than the norm? With the fundamental question behind all of these being: What is God's will in all of this? What is God's will?

Some say God's will is firm and unchanging. Some say that once it's written down in sacred Scripture it can never be changed. This has been the rallying cry for many over the civil unions law that was just passed last week by our State Legislature. "God, in the book of Leviticus, condemned such things. End of story!"

The division these debates have brought within the Body of Christ is both obvious and deeply troubling. So it is no small coincidence (doesn't it seem like every coincidence is pregnant with God?) that today, we hear of a crisis that was about to shatter the early church. It too is a crisis based on scripture. It too is a crisis about insiders and outsiders. It too is a crisis that will result in a complete reversal of opinion about a group of people.

And it is no surprise that one fellow in particular is smack dab in the middle of it all. You know, our dear friend, our dear role model, our dear, frail, confused, yet dogged apostle: Peter.

Peter seems to have gone through all his time with Jesus, and much of his time after the resurrection with one word on his lips: "Huh?!"

“The Messiah must suffer and die.” “Huh?!”

“The Lord is Risen!” “Huh?!”

And today, poor Peter finds himself summoned by the Spirit to go and reach out to the great unwashed, the damned in the sight of God, the wretched, the lost: those the Jewish people called the Gentiles.

This created a terrible crisis in the early church. The Jewish people were the chosen of God. The earliest followers of Jesus were all Jews. They continued to follow Jewish law, and observe Jewish dietary regulations, Jewish customs. They did so because the Jewish people maintained their identity, their cohesion, their very existence, by following the law. By eating what was permitted by the Law.

Lose that, and you risk losing who you are. You risk assimilation into your far stronger neighbor’s community, you risk disappearing from history.

Into that time-honored history, Peter was given a vision. A vision of all the animals that God had earlier forbidden his people to eat. Birds, reptiles, pigs, and more. All the foods prohibited by the Book of Leviticus. The book of Leviticus. The same book relied upon to say “no” to civil unions. The same book relied upon to say “no” to the ordination of those of a particular orientation.

In his vision, a blanket is lowered; on it are all the forbidden foods. And Peter was told, by the one who inspired Leviticus, to kill, and to eat.

He nearly threw up at the thought of it. Yet, three times the voice told him it was okay. Just as a little while ago, the risen Jesus asked him three times “Do you love me?” Three times; a holy number. And in that vision, what had been written in Sacred Scripture, was changed.

God’s Holy Spirit seems to have no regard for our settled ways, no regard for our sensibilities even. Whack!! Change is in the air. When God says to us “I make all things new”, God isn’t talking a new coat of paint. He’s talking something completely different; from the ground up! And that can be very distressing.

And in that sense we too are like Peter in the face of these assaults by the Holy Spirit: Collectively, our response is often “Huh?!”

Now, you may say: “That’s all well and good. But how do we distinguish change that is demanded by the Spirit and change for change sake?” For the answer to that, look to today’s gospel. Jesus left us not with Ten Commandments, but with one command. “Love one another as I have loved you.”

That then is the test, the backstop, the foundation; against which we can decide: is this change from God?

Who did Jesus love? He loved the losers, the lost, the unclean, hookers and tax collectors. How did Jesus love? He loved them to the end. And what an end it was....

If this is whom he loved, if this is how he loved, then maybe we can distinguish Spirit-driven change and change for other reasons this way. Ask this question: Does the change at hand increase or diminish love for one another? Does it tend to erase lines between insiders and outsiders, or does it make the lines thicker, more pronounced? This may be the test. The answers might even be obvious.

This willingness to be smacked upside the head by the Spirit is who we are called to be as church. When the Spirit fell on the apostles at Pentecost it changed them. The Spirit allowed them to see that God is the God of all humanity; that God is in love with all humanity, that God is determined to save all of humanity.

When the Spirit fell on those 7 gentiles to whom Peter was sent, God was demonstrating to Peter, to those gentiles, to us, this all-embracing love that the Creator has for his creatures.

Our human nature is to retreat, to look inward, to circle the wagons, to hold on to the familiar. But our God is a reckless God who continually explodes these efforts at control.

And so, baptism in the Spirit, the same Spirit that fell upon the apostles at Pentecost, the same Spirit that fell on the gentiles, that same Spirit is alive and kicking right here in this community of faith.

Our baptism, through the head-smacking activity of God's Holy Spirit, does not simply signify the unity of the church. It signifies the unity of all humanity in Christ. "All." Think about whom that includes. "All" is not "many." "All" is not "most." "All" is "all".

Our task as Church is to be an example today of that "unity of all" to a world that is still broken into pieces. We are the first fruits of God's promise. You heard it today in Revelation: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them."

Hear the words: It's not among Jews. Not among Gentiles. Not among Roman Catholics. Not among Episcopalians, Not among straights. Not among gays, but, among mortals. Among the peoples. That is where God makes God's home.

And so, "the oneness of the church is the example and guarantee of the

reconciliation of all humankind to God and of the unity of all humanity and all creation in the life of God. The church, the baptized society, is asked to be the image of all humanity, the one, and intimate community of God." Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 111.

In the midst of our bickering, in the midst of our sins, let us love one another as Christ loves us. And whenever we are beset by the power of the Spirit, whenever we are confused by what God is asking of us, whenever it seems that God is pushing us into uncomfortable places, to be with uncomfortable people, let us follow the advice of St. Augustine.

Not when he said: "Save me Lord, but not yet!" But rather, when he summed up what it means to be a Spirit-smitten Christ follower. When he summed up our faith in just a few words.

When he said this:

"Love, and do what you will."

+amen.