

Visions of Church

In the name of the Mother, the Child, and the Spirit among us. Amen.

[Seated - Greetings - good to be here - who I am - fancy pulpit and a bare face]

See Jesus has just been telling his disciples the first must be last and that anyone who welcomes a child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes God who sent me.

John, presumably, wanting to know what limits exist to this welcome, recounts a short story, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

Jesus replies, (Parenthetical, very heavy sigh): Don’t do that. “Whoever is not against us is for us.” If anyone even gives a cup of water to one of you, they’re in; they’re part of the family; they’ll be rewarded along with you.

Then Jesus gets real serious and very much puts his disciples on notice saying, “If any of *you* put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for” you to be drowned in deep water. And it would be better for you to prune off your body parts, rather than sin by harming any of the folks under your care.

Note, and this is really important, these incredibly harsh proclamations from Jesus are in response to John’s idea that one of the primary functions of Christian leaders should be as gatekeepers who get to decide who is worthy of being included.

Gathered together in an Episcopal Church some 2,000 years later, it should probably give us some pause that the sort of governing exclusionary ideal John puts forth and which Jesus so forcefully rejects, has been and continues to be one of the foundational principles of the institutional church in pretty much all of its forms.

After all, Jesus certainly didn't say (as the church generally has), John you were so right, that person wasn't a man, wasn't white, wasn't straight, didn't talk right, look funny and had some weird cultural tendencies. Jesus also didn't say, John you were right that dude wasn't even an ordained deacon, or priest, or bishop - they obviously have no right to do the work of the gospel. Jesus didn't even say, John I'm so glad you checked that fellow, his theology was ludicrous and heretical. Imagine if his casting out of demons actually worked and folks got confused about the nature of true orthodoxy. Phew, dodged a bullet there.

Instead, Jesus says whoever is not against us is for us.

Yet, though we, here in the Episcopal Church, have made enormous strides to live into the type of inclusion demanded by "Whoever is not against us is for us" and the cup of water standard, we still have a long way to go.

For example, I can tell that I fit here. I look the part. My "lifestyle" fits the part. And so I would have to do or say something incredibly offensive, outrageous, and downright ridiculous, probably for the ordination process I'm a part of not to end in my ordination. Yet, in just the couple years I've spent at Yale Divinity School I have repeatedly witnessed individuals I love and respect, individuals far smarter, more talented and prayerful, more needful to this church, suffer needlessly, drop out of the ordination process, and walk away from the church because the fullness of who they are does not fit the mandatory mold or model cast for them by the Episcopal Church. These are folks, holy folks, who have effectively been asked to obscure lop off parts of themselves not to keep themselves from stumbling but to meet the demands of a hierarchical institution.

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."

In no uncertain terms, Jesus makes clear to us, John's ideas of power and exclusion have no place in Christian community.

I think James agrees. James is all about an inclusive egalitarian community that actually practices what it preaches and professes to believe. While John seems very concerned with who gets to be a part of the Jesus movement, James is completely wrapped up in questions of how those who follow Jesus, whoever they are, can best live together and support one another in community.

He makes a few basic recommendations in the passage we read:

If you are suffering, pray.

If you are cheerful, sing it out.

If you are sick, have people come pray for you and treat you like newly minted royalty.

If you mess up, confess to someone who cares.

And whatever else you do, work for reconciliation and inclusion like your life and the lives of everyone in the community depends on it.

Now a lot of this may seem like pretty basic, even cliché, Christian advice. If you suffer, pray. Cool beans. Got it. Thanks a lot James. I'll be sure to do that.

I think, though, actually putting into practice what James is talking about asks a great deal of us. James isn't just saying pray, sing, anoint, confess, reconcile, repeat as needed - these are the commandments! Instead, James' advice for life in community invites us to experience the circumstances and lived realities of our lives as the ground from which we pray, the cathedral in which we worship, the foundation upon which our community relationships are built, the ceremonial space for our own and other's reconciliation and restoration.

James invites us to see our faith and faith community not as elite clubs, or something we do in spite of or to the side of the lives we live, but as something we engage in through our very lives and living in humility and vulnerability together, with one another, as imperfect people in real flesh and blood and fluid-filled bodies with real embodied feelings, emotions, and experiences.

And if we are looking for a way to go from where we are as a church to where we want to be, we would do well to meditate on the simple yet difficult vision of

community James' proposes. What does it look like to pray in the midst of our suffering? To sing when cheerful? To be there for one another when we are sick? To confess? To be a people always working for reconciliation and restoration?

May God help us, Christ walk with us, the Spirit guide us as we together live and discover our answers.