

Proper 11, Year B – Members of God’s Household

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A year ago this past Memorial Day weekend Ann and I were still living in California and we traveled to Charleston, WV, in order to attend her high school reunion, and also to visit with her best high school friend for a couple of days. Her friend’s husband, Bill, is the lead in the choir of the Catholic Cathedral in Charleston; so, consequently, we attended his church that Sunday. They had been at our wedding, and Bill and I had had conversations at that time about our religious views. Therefore he knew that I was a priest in the Episcopal Church, and, though I didn’t actually know it until after the service was over, he had told the priest at his church that I would be there that Sunday – the feast of Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ, which specifically celebrates the Holy Eucharist.

Now we all probably know that the official position of the Catholic Church is that their Eucharist is offered only to Catholics, a statement made, it is said, to encourage those who have left that Church over the centuries – those they often refer to as “Separated Brethren,” like us – to return. On the other hand, I have encountered situations on cruises when hospitality was extended to those of us who were accustomed to services with a Eucharist, and who were not Catholic, but who desired to participate in communion, on the grounds that, since our own Eucharist was not available to us, an exception could be made. I suspect that many of you have found yourselves at functions, like weddings and funerals, where the question of church membership simply never arose. I was at one very memorable wedding at the gorgeous old California mission chapel at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit school, where not only was communion made available to all who attended, but in fact the bride and groom were chalice bearers although she, a good Catholic, was a graduate of Notre Dame, while the groom and his parents were actually members of the Church of England.

So, despite the rule, printed in the bulletin of that Charleston Cathedral, that I wasn’t invited to communion, which I certainly had no intention of breaching in any event, Ann and I were still taken aback by the vigor with which the priest spoke in his homily of the deep emotional attachment he had to the Eucharist and the sadness he therefore felt for those of us who were either not Catholic, or who actually were Catholic, but who were not pure enough because of their un-confessed and un-absolved sins, to participate. It was literally, or felt to us at least like, a twenty-minute rant

directed at least in part at us. Needless to say, we didn't feel exactly welcome in that church. By contrast, needing a respite from the negativity we had just felt, after the service was over we wandered almost directly across the street to the Episcopal Church, where, although we hadn't been to their Eucharist, the first thing that happened as we walked through the door was that someone came up to invite us to the potluck lunch that was currently under way.

That experience came vividly to mind when I read today's section of the letter to the Ephesians. Because of differences in style and vocabulary from letters we know that Paul wrote there is a great likelihood that, despite the fact that it is attributed to Paul, it wasn't actually penned by him, though it may well have been done on his behalf, or even at his behest. Either way, today's reading is one of my absolute favorites. Let me set the scene for you. The writer, whoever it may have been, is writing to a community of gentile Christians to assure them that they are just as good Christians as those, like the Apostles, who were from the same tribe and religion as Jesus himself. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their newest book, *The First Paul*, make a convincing argument that those early gentile Christians were few in number, perhaps no more than a dozen or two in most of those churches, like the one in Ephesus, that Paul had established. Borg and Crossan suggest that they probably came primarily from among the gentiles who, because they were attracted to the idea of monotheism, attended synagogues without, however, going through the necessary ritual, at least for the men, of circumcision, to become Jews themselves. (I can understand their reluctance.) Paul, or his surrogate, tells them that through Christ "both of us," that is, both Jews and gentiles, "have access in one Spirit to the Father." He reminds them that, previously, they were "strangers to the covenants of promise." Now, though, he tells them, "you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and are also members of the household of God." Don't be misled by that word "saint," by the way. Paul and, presumably, those around him call all Christians saints, since the word "saint" merely means "holy," and to Paul all Christians are holy.

So far they are few in number. With some trepidation about their status as followers of a religion that has not yet grown much beyond a small heretical group of Jews, they clearly need assurance that they are no longer strangers. Indeed, that they are not second-class in any way. They are being assured here that they are welcome additions to the small, but growing communities of those who have become persuaded that Jesus has offered a new, more Godly way of life, and that God himself has, in

the Easter event, placed, as it were, a giant exclamation point of agreement.

Aliens and strangers are the subject of other biblical passages. In Leviticus, for example, Israel is commanded to love aliens: "...you shall love the alien as yourself," it says, "for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." You might also think in this regard about this morning's reading from Jeremiah where the Lord bemoans the fact that his flocks have been scattered and promises to gather them back to their fold. Doesn't this promise apply rather nicely to the gentiles who are being addressed in the letter to the Ephesians – that they are being gathered into God's fold?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul (and there is no question but that Romans is a genuine letter of Paul's) admonishes those in that congregation to "welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." And, of course, you may also remember the Gospel passage in Matthew, Chapter 25, that tells us that stranger status itself is not something anyone should ever be ashamed of, as Jesus tells how the Son of Man will separate people as a shepherd would the sheep from goats. One of the qualifications is the distinction between those who took him in when he was a stranger and those who did not:

⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

So the reception that Ann and I received in Charleston raises for me a very crucial question about the sort of Church we want. Paul's charge was to be an apostle specifically to the gentiles, while Peter and Jesus' brother James led the effort to convert the Jews, but the expectation was, as this morning's reading puts it, that both groups would be built spiritually into "a dwelling place for God" – that is, one dwelling place, not two. Is the Catholic church in Charleston, or St. John's Episcopal church in Salisbury for that matter, or any church anywhere, representing the way espoused by Paul, or by Jesus himself, unless we see ourselves, not as keepers of a home that we protect from those who differ theologically or socially or in any other way, but as, essentially, Christ's servants, who prepare the table over which it is Christ himself who actually presides, and who are

happy to open the doors to any and all who might want to share the food at that table with us?

I think that priest in West Virginia did a terrible job of honoring the gospel, and I frankly think that we do a pretty good job at St. John's, but it never hurts to remind ourselves that Ephesians does not depict becoming a dwelling place for God as about developing personal holiness or doctrinal purity. Nor do the Gospels, where the emphasis is always on the radical hospitality that Christ himself displayed, not only in his dealings with sinners and tax collectors and others at the margins of society but with everyone who wishes it. We see that hospitality displayed – maybe especially – in this morning's Gospel reading where, despite his and his disciples being worn out from their travels and the incessant call from crowds for teachings and healings, and very much in need of rest and refreshment, Jesus encounters even more crowds and, taking compassion on them, continues his tiring ministry without, it must be noted, requesting any of them to tell him first what they believe or to confess any of their sins to him.

If Jesus would turn no one away, how can any of his followers?

AMEN