

Easter 6B 2021 St Luke's Anchorage Who is Out and Who is In? Rev Anne Harris

Acts 10: 44-48, Psalm 98, 1 John 5: 1-6, John 15: 9-17

The readings for today raise a question for Christians: Who is out and who is in?

In the earliest days of the Christian faith there was a lot of earnest discussion and serious praying about who could be a legitimate follower of Jesus Christ, and what had to be done to enter the fellowship of believers. Rachel Held Evans, author and blogger who died unexpectedly almost exactly two years ago said "The apostles remembered what many modern Christians tend to forget- that what makes the Gospel offensive isn't who it keeps out but who it lets in."

Last Sunday we heard the story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian, and the disciple Philip's reaction when the gentile man asked to be baptized, bearing in mind that all of the original disciples were Jewish.

Philip went ahead and performed the baptism - the formal rite of entry to the new faith, bringing a person who was out of the fellowship of God into the family of God. This is surprising, perhaps even shocking, as I said last week, because the Ethiopian man was disqualified from entry on two counts. First he was a gentile, and second he had been subjected to a kind of mutilation that denied entry to the Temple.

Judaism was an **exclusive** religion with strict entry requirements, and with no express commandments to encourage others to join the faith. In fact one of the defining attributes of Judaism was that its people were **called out** from among the nations to be a **separate** and holy people.

And so the earliest followers of Jesus had a problem. They felt bound by the rules of the past – including those that said all males had to be circumcised, and those that required the observation of special

dietary rules, and many others. But as cut and dried as the human leaders wanted to be with regard to who was in and who was out, it was God who kept breaking the rules!

We saw God breaking the rules in last Sunday's scripture about Philip and the Ethiopian, and in today's first reading we are given another example of God overriding what had been required and expected in the past. Peter and the other "circumcised believers" watched in astonishment as God poured out his Spirit on all who heard the word! They saw clearly, that God was including "even the gentiles" in this new phase of his reign.

And Peter hit the nail on the head (for once) when he proclaimed "can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit, just as we have?" That, of course, was the \$64,000 question for those early Christians, and incredibly, it is still so for some of us today.

We still argue among denominations about the validity of baptizing infants, for example. Then there are those who separate themselves from other denominations because of the way Holy Scripture is interpreted, and there are those who draw the line between who is out and who is in in numerous other different places. We have thousands of ways of drawing the line between them and us.

But when the Holy Spirit comes near, all those "lines" that divide us are blown away.

I think it is clear when we look at what is happening to the church today that we are in the midst of a period of upheaval and change. (And by the church I mean the whole body of Christ, all the different denominations, and even those who follow Christ and don't belong to a denomination). Phyllis Tickle<sup>1</sup>, of blessed memory, spoke and wrote repeatedly of the "500 year rummage sale" in the church where the Holy Spirit blows things apart and cleans everything up, approximately at five hundred year intervals.

Starting at the birth of Jesus which we will call year zero, God did something revolutionary in becoming incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. Then approximately five hundred years later there was the fall of the

Roman Empire with its lasting effect on the church. Five hundred years after that, give or take a few years, there was the Great Schism between the Eastern branch and the Western branch of Christendom. Five hundred years after that, in 1517 the Protestant Reformation began, and that brings us to the year 2000, give or take a decade or two.

Phyllis Tickle described the church that was being reformed in our time as the “emergence church.” I haven’t studied the characteristics of emergence Christianity as she and others saw it, but it doesn’t take an ecclesialogist to see that changes **are** happening to the church, or a prophet to proclaim that there will be more change ahead.

Change is seldom easy but let me assure you that change is not a dirty word. We need to change and grow. We are not yet where God wants us to be. In two thousand years we are still way behind in understanding who is out and who is in when it comes to the reign of God. We are still grappling with how immense and endless is the generous, love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness that God offers to all who hear and respond to the good news of salvation.

In our Gospel reading this morning we heard Jesus summing up the law; the law that had been codified and added to until it reached 613 commandments, all designed to help people do what God wanted them to do, and to avoid doing what God did not want them to do: Laws that were helpful in deciding who was out and who was in.

Jesus’ commandment says only one thing about what we have to do to stay in God’s good books, and absolutely nothing about what we should avoid doing for fear of being cut off forever.

Jesus said: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” That’s it. Just one commandment. Simple, right?

But what does the kind of love that Jesus had for his disciples look like? It is much more than just “nice words and warm affection” as Kathryn Huey<sup>ii</sup> a biblical commentator says.

To find out what this kind of love looks like, we have to look at just how Jesus showed his love for those among whom he walked, and just who it was that he loved. Jesus is our model for God’s love lived among us.

Jesus showed his love by healing his neighbors, and feeding them, and teaching them about God and the kingdom of God. He showed his love by the way he lived his own life.

And who did he love? He loved Jews, and Samaritans. He loved Romans and Greeks and other gentiles. He loved lepers, and outcasts like tax collectors, and prostitutes. He loved ordinary people such as fishermen, builders, homemakers, church leaders. He loved rich people, poor people, divorced people, married people, single people. He loved men, women, and children. There are instances in the Gospels of Jesus interacting with love with each and every one of all of these diverse kinds of people.

And for further proof of the inclusiveness of his love we have to remember just who exactly it was that Jesus died for – because surely that is the final proof of the wideness of his love?

And I do not recall Jesus going to the cross with a list of those who were barred from the salvation that his death would procure. There were no exemption clauses. There was no pre-selection of who was out and who was in. He did not call out from the cross, “Father, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing, except for the pagan Romans and their ghastly goings on in their temples, and the ones who botched my trial, and the ones that carried out my execution.”

He did not, and even if he had the strength he would not have. Why? Because God’s love is generous and wide beyond measure. His grace is offered to all who hear his word and respond to it. There are no exceptions.

And so, beloved, chosen of God, we should never put restrictions on God's love and mercy. God is still actively breaking the rules through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Look around. Be amazed and astounded! And be everlastingly grateful for the wideness of his love. For if not for that love, we as gentiles would ALL be "out" and others would be "in." Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Tickle, Phyllis. Founding editor of the Religion Department of PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, the international journal of the book industry, author of over three dozen books about Christianity, lecturer, and Episcopalian.

<sup>ii</sup> Huey, The Reverend Kathryn Matthews. UCC Pastor and contributor to Sermon Seeds.