

"ENTICEMENT OF EXCLUSIVENESS"

INTRODUCTION

Late Thursday afternoon I was looking through the J. B. Phillip's translation of Luke's Gospel when the passage that Mr. Zier read for our scripture lesson caught my attention and suggested itself as a launching pad for today's sermon which comes at the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Jesus had been talking about His understanding of greatness. Said He, "It is the humblest among you that is really the greatest". This was a line that was destined to be remembered and repeated across the centuries.

But as this passage progresses, you know that one of his disciples was not fully tuned in to what Jesus was saying. His mind was somewhere else. He was thinking about something that had happened several days before. The disciples had found a man that they did not know speaking and acting in the name of Jesus. And quickly, they took it upon themselves to set him straight. He had not been chosen and commissioned in just the way they had. He didn't belong to their union, and because they did not approve of his credentials, they told him to keep still.

Apparently John was thinking about this incident while Jesus was talking to them about true greatness. And as though he had not heard a word that Jesus had said, he broke in to say, "By the way, Lord, we saw a man driving out evil spirits in your name, but we stopped him....for he is not one of us".

And Jesus responded with this word of reproach, "You must not stop him...."

NOT ONE OF US

"He is not one of us..." Here were men on the way to sainthood, but every now and then getting stuck on a side road as they struggled with some of their emotions that had not yet been mastered by the man they had come to call "Master".

In this particular instance, it was this subtle temptation to a certain separatism....to some awkward feelings of snobbery and superiority. After all - had they not been hand-picked by Jesus as his lieutenants? Had He not chosen them and charged them to do His work? Now...just who did this "unknown upstart" think he was...talking and acting as though he was a disciple of their Lord, a follower in good standing.

And so they quickly put this man in his place and made it clear that he was not a member of their little club. But Jesus, on the other hand, would have none of that narrow exclusiveness and quickly reminded them that this was not the way to which he was calling them.

"But Lord - he is not one of us..." "You must not stop him". Every now and then one bumps up against this sentiment in life today. In its most extreme form, it is the rather haughty isolation of the sort celebrated in that jingle about the blue-bloods of Boston. Remember how it goes.

"Boston....the home of the bean and the cod,
Where the Lowells talk to the Cabots,
And the Cabots talk only to God."

We smile at that, but let's face it - there's something of this in most people. We see it in children with their clubs and gangs. We see it on college campuses with

This is the "in" label to have in your coat, ₂ - This is the "in" car to drive.

their distinctions of Greeks and independents. We see it in adults with their pride in possessions, genealogy, clubs, social status. Some years ago a prayer was offered up in Cambridge, Massachusetts that went something like this...."for Harvard University and all lesser institutions..." We see it in churches in the reluctance of some not to reach out and welcome others into their fellowship.

We all like to feel part of the "in" group, and there are times when we dismiss someone outside the circle exactly in the same way John did...."but he is not one of us."

A SUBTLE APPEAL

When you stop to think about it, isn't it often true that advertising plays heavily upon this tendency in our nature. There's an appeal to a certain snobbery, to status, to separatism. You know how it goes: men of distinction drink this. People with taste come here. This is the "in" shop. This is the "in" restaurant. Persons of consequence read this paper. This is the "in" school to put your child in to. And we fall for it.

It reminds me of a letter I received a number of years ago which contained a very gracious invitation on lovely stationery from a Mr. Hefner. He was inviting me to apply for membership in a certain Club here in the city. The invitation read as follows:

"I have been assured by some of your friends that you are an individual of cultivated tastes and strong quality preferences....(I really sat up with that one) ...that's why I am sending you this personal invitation.. to join a club designed expressly for a select and discerning few".

Along with the invitation there was a little key with a picture of a "bunny" on the end of it. I was flattered until I came to realize that a lot of men in NYC were receiving this same letter from Hugh Hefner....to join the Playboy Club.

How easily we get caught up in this subtle appeal to superiority and separatism. It's so easy to judge people by where they live - rather than how they live. By what they have - rather than what they are. By whom they know rather than what they know. There are times when we sadly succumb to that narrow and clubby complex, thinking and saying to each other: "He is not one of us...." To which Jesus says, "Come now...think again. ...you're getting your values all mixed up and missing something in the process".

EXCLUSIVENESS IN THE CHURCH

Now I want to develop this matter of exclusiveness - "the enticement of exclusiveness" with you in regard to the church.

Take the matter of creeds and denominations within the Christian family first. We're still plagued with some of this narrow spirit when it comes to things like creeds and churches. True, there's been considerable progress here in our lifetime. There's nothing like the denominational arrogance of a few decades back and we rejoice in the growth of the ecumenical spirit, even though it seems to be resting on a plateau right now. It's incredible to think that Christians could have at one time sung such smug, narrow-minded words as these:

"We are God's favored few; all others will be damned.

There is no place in heaven for you, we can't have heaven crammed!"

I don't know whether people actually sang such words, but unfortunately that is the way a lot of people thought and acted. There were Methodists and Baptists and Lutherans and Anglicans...looking cautiously and suspiciously at each other... grumbling..."He is not one of us". We're getting away from that.

Last Sunday afternoon as we shared in worship and fellowship with our Christ an brothers and sisters over at St. Thomas More Roman Catholic Church, I couldn't help but think how far we've come in recent years. It was warm fellowship that we had with our Catholic and Lutheran and Anglican friends. And I feel we're beginning to understand a little of what Jesus was trying to get across to John that day in Galilee - that God just might be working in and through people with other brand names.

I suppose that John represents a tendency common in religious people to identify their sector of the kingdom with the whole. This tendency is sired by misguided zeal. How many times in the long history of the Christian Church has one particular fold assumed that it was the entire flock of God. No group, however devout, has a monopoly on the truth, or exclusive franchise rights to set up shop in Jesus' name.

OTHER TRADITIONS In our better moments, at least, we are beginning to comprehend the genius and the rich contributions of those who stand in traditions other than our own. Increasingly evident in our day among a growing number are feelings of trust, and of open-mindedness among people of different creeds, customs and races.

I believe we can be true to the light as we are given to see the light in our own tradition without claiming that we have an exclusive monopoly on the truth or on God. It can begin to dawn on us that we can be sincere Christians of the Protestant persuasion without supposing that God is uncongenial to the Roman Catholics or that He has deserted the Jewish people, or that He is unknown to the followers of Islam, or Buddha, or Hinduism. As the Hindu says, "All truth is One - sages call it by different names".

I - for one - would not want to rule out the possibility that God is speaking through channels other than the Church. I believe it would be a great thing if the last 25 years of this century could be remembered as a time when religious people outgrew their sectarian superiorities and truly demonstrated the meaning of "the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God". Said Tennyson, writing over a hundred years ago:

"Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be.
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they"

BACK TO JESUS Back to John and to Jesus. "But he is not one of us" said John. And Jesus replied, "You must not stop him....". Jesus, in effect, was saying, "Cool it, John.....take your mission seriously, but not yourself". He might have gone on to say "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold....them also I must bring".

Jesus came into our world and moved among people very much like ourselves. The people of his time had their walls - walls between groups and classes, creeds and races. And Jesus proceeded to upset people by breaking down those barriers.

Every one in a while He made room in the kingdom for those whom the Jews thought

For instance,

didn't have a chance. He had high praise for the Syro Phoenician woman who had faith enough to believe that Jesus could heal her daughter. He lauded the Centurion, a Gentile, whose servant was ill and who persisted in asking Jesus to help. He was so impressed that he said, "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith!" (Which could be translated - 'why even in my own Church I never saw people believe like this').

On occasion He exalted the Samaritans. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a total outsider is the one who does the right thing. The Samaritans accepted only the first five books of the Bible - the Pentateuch. Jesus, in effect, was saying that some people with only a fraction of the Bible to support them come closer to the will of God than those who claim to believe the whole thing.

Some whom we deem to be "inside the fold" are out! Some whom we deem to be "outside the fold" are really in! Faith has more allies than we are prone to suspect. Remember that hymn we use to sing in Sunday School, "Who is on the Lord's side?" "Teacher....we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we stopped him....for he is not one of us" But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him...for He that is not against us is for us".

CONCLUSION Jesus showed such an utter disregard for the distinctions and the exclusiveness of His own people that seemed so important to them, but He did with such a style and such a graciousness of spirit and a grace that there were those who came to recognize the handwriting of God in all of it. And a few years later, the Apostle Paul, who himself had once fought so hard for all of the old forms of exclusiveness, summed up the meaning of the Christ-event for them in these words:

"For He is our peace....who has made us both one....and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility".

Let me run it past you one more time. All of this is simple to say to you that:

1. The Church is bigger than any single parish or tradition.
2. The Kingdom of God is greater than the Church.
3. The Christ of Faith is often present in many people who do not know or trust the name of Jesus.

God can take care of his interest. Waste no worry here. Who is on the Lord's side? Make sure you are and be glad!

PRAYER We thank thee, O God and Father of us all, for all who join us, by whatever name or sign, in working for a world where love and peace exist, a world in which thy will is done. Keep us steadfast and unmoveable in the knowledge that in Thee no labor is in vain. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen