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Who's in and who's out?

When I was a kid, from about 6th grade to somewhere in 10th, I was something of a pariah, an outcast. I know, I know, I'm so utterly cool now that it's hard to believe. That was irony, in case you don't know me well enough yet to know that I couldn't be cool if you put me in a freezer.

Anyway, my outcast status didn't actually end in 10th grade, but I went to a large enough high school that it had its own uncool caste and I finally had a good-sized group to hang around with. But not so much in junior high school. For those of you kids in middle school, junior high is what we called middle school back in the stone ages.

Junior high school was all about dividing us into who's in and who's out, sheep and goats, cool and uncool. And, like in *Lord of the Flies*, it was all decided by the kids themselves, although the teachers were sometimes unwitting pawns in the process. As an outcast, uncool, goat, my life was pretty miserable for a couple of years.

The same thing has happened, and is happening, in the Church as happened in junior high. Instead of being unified as the Body of Christ, we have spent an awful lot of time trying to exclude other people from that Body. The number of, quote, authorities, who absolutely know who is going to heaven and who isn't is staggering, and growing by the minute.

And this is nothing new. It's been going on for the last 2,000 years, and even longer if you count all of the divisions in Judaism prior to the birth of Christ. We have the first division when Gentiles wish to join the all Jewish Christ-believer sect and meet with stiff resistance from the leadership in Jerusalem. It takes a vision from God for Peter to change his mind on that one, and even then it's conditional until Paul and Barnabas come along.

Then we have the various heretical groups, all brought firmly to heel by the first four Ecumenical Councils. Next we have the Great Schism between the Eastern Church in Constantinople and the Western Church in Rome. Next we fast-forward to the Reformation, although there had been various religious uprisings and defections before that time. Then, almost before Luther is done nailing his these to that door in Wittenburg, factions grew up that split the Reformers into different camps.

And of course, there's our own little corner of the Reformation, the formation of the Church of England and the subsequent Elizabethan Settlement to hold it together briefly. But even the Church of England got into the act, after Elizabeth died, with dizzying swings between Puritanism and Roman Catholicism with every new monarch.

According to Wikipedia, there are now approximately 41,000 Christian denominations worldwide. It seems, like junior high school students, it's in our nature to try to figure out who's in and who's out.

Which is why we need to fight against our nature.

As Paul describes it in his letter to the Philippians, before his road to Damascus event he was definitely in the in-group of both Roman society and Jewish leadership. He was a Greek educated Roman citizen, and a Pharisee. He kept the Torah as well as anyone could. All of the things that separated him from the hoi polloi were his either by birth or by his own action.

And he gave it all up. He gave it up to become a follower of Christ. He went against his nature, his upbringing, his education, and even his earlier convictions. He threw himself out of his own in group – became an outcast, a pariah. But he didn't do it alone. He did it with God's help.

I think this is where the Church goes wrong sometimes. They forget why they exist. They forget to ask for God's help. Doctrines, rules, and orthodox practices are devised, not for the glory of God, but for the power of the Church. Oftentimes, we in the Church decide who's in and who's out, without consulting the one who really gets to make that decision.

But we in the Episcopal Church are above all that, right? We would never exclude someone for reasons of his race or social standing, right? Or her mental health, or hygiene, or sexual preference?

Well, I hate to break the bad news, but we in the Episcopal Church do this all the time. Every day. But it doesn't have to be that way. The Church can change, and has already changed, as I am living proof as a woman priest. But it takes effort and will and courage – courage like Paul had. We don't need a road to Damascus conversion because we already know and love Christ. But we need to cultivate the desire to take the next step.

I want to try a little thought exercise. This is just an exercise, not an attempt to refute anything John is trying to tell us in his Gospel. But it might be revealing.

In today's Gospel, we're at dinner in Bethany with Jesus, the 12 presumably because it includes Judas, and Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha is, as usual, serving dinner. Mary is sitting in her accustomed place at Jesus' feet. All of a sudden, she whips out a six-ounce bottle of Clive Christian Number 1 Imperial Majesty perfume, clocking in at $12,721.89 per ounce, and pours it over Jesus' feet.

Judas is enraged. Leaving aside how she managed to afford it, and why anyone in their right mind would pay that much for perfume in the first place, he demands to know why it wasn't sold and the proceeds used to feed the poor. Now John the Gospel writer jumps in here to reassure us that Judas' motives were anything but pure, and that he wanted that money for himself, but Jesus merely says leave her alone and quotes Deuteronomy in saying the poor will always be with them.

So here's the exercise. In this story we have the actions of two followers of Jesus. We have Mary, who in a lovely gesture literally sacrificed all she owned and gave it to God. The Gospel talks about the fragrance filling the whole house, which is reminiscent of the fragrant sacrificial smoke used in the temple. Then there's Judas, who at least overtly demonstrates a desire to help the poor, which Jesus had preached over and over. For the purposes of this exercise, let's pretend that John never inserted the part about Judas being a thief and let's pretend that he's sincere.

Isn't helping the poor what we're supposed to be doing? The whole passage from Deuteronomy that Jesus quotes is, "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’"

So of these two, who is the better follower of Jesus? Who's in and who's out?

Now, to make the exercise a little more challenging, let's put Judas' nefarious motives back in. We know that he will betray Jesus, and here John tells us that he's a thief as well. He's a thoroughly despicable character. And yet, he's one of the chosen twelve. He's a disciple of Jesus.

Last week, we heard the story of the prodigal son, and heard that it is the third of three stories about things being lost and then found again. Well, who is more completely lost than Judas? Is he too lost to be redeemed by the one who came into this world to recover the lost? And if he's too lost, what about Peter? Peter didn't betray Jesus to the authorities, but he did deny him not once, but three times – even after being told he would. And what about Paul? Sure he changed his spots, but his actions were pretty terrible before the incident on road to Damascus.

What about us?

There are two points to this exercise. One is that NONE of us can be redeemed by our own actions, and the other is that NONE of us can decide who's in and who's out. Like Paul, all we can do is to press on to know Christ, because Christ Jesus has made us his own.

And thankfully, Jesus has told us how to do this. Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Love your neighbors. Decide that everyone's in, and no one's out.

Incredibly, there are some who have used Jesus' quote in this passage, "The poor will always be with us," to mean that we shouldn't help the poor, either because it's a hopeless cause or because God willed them to be poor. We must not do that. We must open our doors, our checkbooks, our arms, and our hearts to those in need, whenever we can and however we can, individually and as a Church.

God's grace is certainly given freely to us. But the paradox is that just like Mary giving up a year's wages worth of perfume to anoint Jesus, and Paul giving up his whole way of life and counting it as rubbish, following Jesus shouldn't be without cost to us. It should literally cost us everything we have and everything we are.

Amen.