

Pentecost 4A - Proper 5
St. David's

Last Sunday, while all of you were celebrating morning prayer with Lee Montgomery, Jean and I were in Ocala, Florida attending services at Jean's daughter's home congregation. Going to church with Jean's daughters is always a bit dicey, because of her girls strong fundamentalist stances, and their belief that I have led their mother astray from the real truth. They also harbor concern that we will infect their children with a progressive, hear non-Christian agenda. In this setting, Jean felt that maybe it was best that we not go to church with them on Sunday. After all, we had spent the whole day there the day before for her grandson's graduation.

As you all know though, I am Anglican to the core. I still believe in my idealistic little heart that all of us should be able to worship together despite our theological differences. I still believe that church is supposed to bring us together, not separate us. In fact, I will go to the grave trying to convince the world that all churches can be like St. David's. In addition, I will admit that it hurt me deeply when one of Jean's daughters came here and decided they could not attend our church at all. I told Jean I would not participate in such exclusion on any level, and therefore, I would go to their church, no matter how uncomfortable it made me feel. Boy, would I be sorry I ever said that.

It just so happened that it was the first Sunday of the month, a day for communion in many Christian traditions. Wow, what a great bonding experience, I thought. An opportunity to break bread with the children and grandchildren, linking us all together as one. So there I sat through the sermon on Revelation (tell me, why is it that every time I go to a non-lectionary church, they are always preaching on Revelation

or the Pastoral Epistles), and the spiritual warfare I was told I should be waging against my fellow humans. I was calm as could be as the preacher told me how Satan had infected the world and we better get ready to rumble. What we needed here, I thought, was communion. What we needed was an act to tie us together as the Body of Christ. So I waited. And then, it happened. For the first time in my life in something other than a Roman Catholic church, Jean and I were told from the pulpit, very specifically, that we were not welcome to partake in communion. His phrase was, “if you are not a member of a Bible based evangelical church, you are not invited to receive here.” And then, to make sure we knew we were not welcome, he defined his use of the term evangelical in such a narrow fashion that many Southern Baptists would have found themselves outside his loop.

Jean said that she had heard people use the term “bristle” before, but that this was the first time in her life that she actually felt her body bristle. Unable to respond, we sat there isolated and alone, while we were visibly removed and ostracized from the community.

My goal this morning is not to pick on the pastor of that church or fundamentalists in general, or the churches that have stopped calling themselves fundamentalist and co-opted the word evangelical instead. I am sick to death of it all and I am not going to participate in the polarization that continues to separate us from one another. The reality is that what this pastor did is no different than what we all do. When churches form, they may start being about love of God and love and care of neighbor, but somehow, we all start falling into the purity code trap. We all start

making rules about who can come in and who cannot. Perhaps we are a little better at the communion thing, but Episcopalians participate in this same exclusion when we smugly believe that we are the thinking person's church and that we "get it" when those idiots over there don't. God just keeps telling us and showing us that religion is supposed to be about welcoming all, especially those who feel left out, and we just keep turning it into a closed society that only those who follow the secret code can enter. God says religion is all about welcoming the despised, and we keep turning it back into a purity code, over and over again.

It all starts with Sara and Abraham in our first two readings. This is the couple from whom three of the world's major religions trace their lineage. Beginning with today's reading, the Hebrew bible makes it clear that God chooses Sarah and Abraham as the chosen ones and that God will go on to make their descendants, the people who will later be known as the Jews, to be God's chosen people.

Obviously then, Sarah and Abraham must be very special people right? Well, let's look at how special they are. Abraham was apparently moderately successful in his business life. For a nomad, he was pretty wealthy. But his family life was the pits. Apparently, Sarah was a bit of a trophy wife, and Abraham was so concerned that someone was going to kill him to get to her that he tried to pass her off as his sister. Of course what that did was put all the pressure on her, who was apparently chased by every man around. In their later life, as Sarah and Abraham became more and more desperate to have a child, a male child so that their lineage would not die, Sarah finally suggested that her husband make it with the servant girl. And although God had

already promised Abraham a child by Sarah, he was more than happy to get it on with Hagar. Sarah, for her part, would respond to the event after the fact by kicking Hagar out of her house even though she was pregnant.

There you have it. The mother and father of our faith tradition would have made great guests on the most disgusting cultural phenomena of our own time, the Jerry Springer show.

From these people, Judaism believes that they are God's chosen people. So what happens? They get smug and start believing that all of the rules they have to keep themselves separate from the dominant cultures surrounding them somehow make them better people than everyone else. In fact, they start shunning those who don't follow the 631 laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. So what they do is create a group of people who are outcast. Because they start believing that they have a corner on the truth because they are now God's chosen people, they start treating other people with the same disrespect that caused God to stand up for them in the first place. The oppressed become the oppressors. God steps in again and reminds them, "remember that you too were once wandering Arameans in a foreign land. Treat all aliens with respect and dignity and always invite them to the table." We watch Sara and Abraham do this with the three strangers depicted in Rublev's trinity. But no sooner did Sara and Abraham welcome all to the table that the purity code takes over again and Judaism becomes all about following the rules and kicking out people who are different from them. The Pharisees of Jesus' age are not bad guys, they are the ones who have done the very best living into the purity code. But the code, Jesus says, is not religion. It is

supposed to be a guide, not a weapon to beat other people into being like you.

We don't know a heck of a lot about Matthew, or Levi, as this person is referred to in Luke and Mark. But that's probably good. Because the one thing we do know about the person that Jesus asks to join him today is that he was a tax collector. Over and over in the Gospel accounts, tax collectors are described as the scummiest individuals of the day. That's because they were collecting money from people who didn't have it, to pay the Roman government who was occupying their land. If that wasn't bad enough, the tax collector was supposed to make their money by skimming money off the top. They made their living by being allies of the Romans in the oppression of their own people.

The people who ask the questions in today's Gospel, the Pharisees, believe that being God's chosen people meant that they were special, that they were a royal nation, a people set apart. They believed that they were among the chosen people because God saw that they lived their faith better than others. So all over again, somehow missing all the other times in their history that God taught this lesson, they want to know, why would Jesus hang around with these unchosen people, with the people not in God's plan?

As a side, note that in a classic case of triangling, the Pharisees don't take this matter directly to Jesus. Instead of asking him why he had chosen a loser like Matthew, they ask the other disciples. "Why does *your teacher* eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus does two things with his response. First, he breaks the triangle. Rather than respond indirectly, he goes right to the Pharisees and answers their question. Here

is our own lesson for how we are to respond to innuendo and people talking about us to others. We go to the source of the complaint and respond.

Secondly, Jesus' response is a reminder to the Pharisees and to us that God never chooses people because they are the best or special, but just the opposite. God always chooses people who are flawed, who are lacking. God chooses people who need help. Quoting a famous quip of the day he says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

The Pharisees feelings of superiority over others as God's chosen people is one we have repeated down through the centuries. As many times as God steers us away from the idea that religion is about purity, we turn it right back into exactly that, forgetting that our call is to embrace the person we cannot relate to on any level.

When I first pondered today's Gospel, I wondered why in the world the author would string together these seemingly disparate stories of Matthew's call, the death of the daughter of a synagogue leader, and the poor woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. But what links all of them together is that purity code. All of the people Jesus embraces are extreme examples of people who are outside of it. Matthew is shunned because of his job. The hemorrhaging woman is impure because she is bleeding and is therefore an outcast from society. And the synagogue leader's daughter has been literally removed from society, she's dead. All of them are in need of restoration. All of them are separated from the world and can only be let back in through God's healing. And each of them, like Sarah and Abraham, are chosen by God to be made whole again.

That is what it means when we say that we are God's chosen people. The chosen ones are the ordinary ones. We are the ones who are flawed. We are the ones who have been ostracized by others because of our mistakes, our impurities, our past lives. We were chosen because we are in need of restoration.

As a result, our service to God will be to bear this same witness to all of the world. We are called to bring the restoration that we have experienced to others, most particularly those who have been labeled by the world as unwell. We are called to seek out those who have been marginalized by others, those whose lives are not complete. As God's chosen ones, we are called to heal, to restore the portions of people's lives that have been taken away from them, to make people whole. We who have been touched by Jesus are now called to spread that touch to all.

A few weeks ago when the Presiding Bishop was in Salt Lake City for our Diocesan Spring Weekend, she recommended two books to us in the course of her talks. The first was this one, *Take this Bread*, by Sara Miles. Sara is to St. Gregory's of Nyssa in San Francisco what Jean is to St. David's. She is director of their food pantry, among other things. Sara never set foot in a church in her entire life, due to her parents fierce opposition to religion of any kind in any flavor. But then one day, something made her walk into that strangely shaped sanctuary, not unlike the one we sit in here. Listen to her tell the story:

I dare say that what so emotionally and so immediately connected Sara to faith that day is the same thing that brought many of us to St. David's. What St. Gregory's

and St. David's lives out in our liturgies is what many have referred to as a radical understanding of the Gospel. They see us as being out on the edge of Christian belief when we invite everyone to this table, whether they be murderers, Bishops or both. But my friends, how can we hear Jesus' actions in today's Gospel and do anything but feed everyone and welcome everyone with open arms to this table?

This Thursday, we will gather for the moment we have been waiting for, for years. In some ways, it is the moment that I have waited for my whole life. I want you to all savor every moment of that experience. It is going to be beyond wonderful. But on that evening, you and I will also have a unique opportunity. We get to show others what inclusivity and following Jesus' table manners is all about. Our church will be full of people from various faith traditions and walks of life. It will probably be the best opportunity any of us will ever have in our entire lives to teach others what it means to never turn anyone away from this table. Let us open our arms wide to all and bring us into communion with strangers, with people who, like Sara Miles, may not even understand what we are doing. Because if we do so, there is the strongest possibility that someone is going to have a Sara Miles experience of communion in our midst. It is at that moment that all of us will taste God together, no matter how different our theology may be, and that my friends is what it is all about. It is why this building exists, it is why we are here. Amen.