

The included and the excluded

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (OS 22C)

Published in the Ministry District of Yorke Peninsula

Sunday, August 28, 2022

People love to tell this story on themselves, no matter what their denominational affiliation. Bruce, a staunch Anglican dies and is welcomed at the pearly gates. He is given a tour of the mansions of heaven by the angel in charge. As they pass various chambers, the angel identifies the inhabitants: "This is where the Roman Catholics reside, and here are the Methodists, and over there the Lutherans." Then, as they pass another room, the angel whispers "Sh! This is where the Anglicans are, they think they're the only ones here."

The story is a humorous way of acknowledging our limited vision of the kingdom of God. We can laugh at the thought of our being in heaven without being aware of the presence of fellow Christians whom we confess to be part of the "one, holy, catholic church." But the story loses its humour for most people if it becomes as broadly inclusive as Jesus suggests in the gospel reading, when he says that people "will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the dominion of God." This is not something new that Jesus made up. His words reflect the imagery in the Old Testament reading which speaks of bringing people from all the nations to the holy mountain of Jerusalem. If there are going to be people from Iraq and Indonesia there, then maybe we wouldn't want to know who is in the next room of the heavenly mansion.

Jesus had been asked the question, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" There are two surprising things about his answer. First, he implies that there will be people there that we would never have expected, people who are very different from us. That is both sobering and liberating: sobering, because it challenges the provincial way we envision the kingdom of God; and liberating, because it encourages us to think of all humanity not only as neighbours but as family. And if that will be so then, "at table in the dominion of God," why not now?

A second surprising and somewhat disturbing element in Jesus' answer to the question about who will be saved is that it prompts us to question whether we will be seated at the heavenly banquet. The story about a group thinking they are the only ones in heaven at least assumes that the group is there and can laugh about its provincialism. But Jesus suggests that many who think that they have assured seating at that wondrous feast are in for a rude surprise. Narrow is the door and stern the householder in passing judgment on who will enter and who will be thrust out.

This is a hard saying of Jesus and seemingly no word of gospel at all. What can it mean? Is Jesus laying down conditions that must be met for entrance into the kingdom? Will our souls in fact be weighed on the scales of justice on the day of judgment? Will we be facing an angry God when we approach the narrow door?

The key to understanding the warning of Jesus that "some are last who will be first" is to be found in the meaning of the metaphor "door," the narrow door by which we gain entrance to the kingdom of God. On another occasion Jesus said: "I am the door; any one who enters by me will be saved," or, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it in the second

reading this morning, Jesus is the "mediator of a new covenant." The door that serves as the entrance to the dominion of God is Jesus, the very Jesus who mediated the new covenant through the blood he shed for us, the very Jesus whose broken body and shed blood we receive in the banquet prepared for us today. There is no other door, no other way.

If that is so, then what makes the saying of Jesus hard? Because it exposes what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." Because it is possible, as St. Paul warned the Corinthians, that when we meet together, it is not the Lord's Supper we eat. Because it will not be sufficient in that day to say, "Lord, open to us.... We ate and drank in your presence." Because it's possible for us to eat and drink judgment upon ourselves. To enter the narrow door that is Jesus is to enter the narrow way that is called the way of the cross. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, that narrow way calls for spiritual discipline, a discipline that often seems more painful than pleasant, and only later yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Let there be no doubts in your mind about the invitation of Jesus to share in the banquet he lays before us today and also in the heavenly banquet he is preparing for us. The invitation is extended to you freely without any conditions attached. But at the same time do not be falsely reassured that this gracious offer of forgiveness and fellowship is all there is to the Christian life. The reason that our Lord will say to some who expect to be at the feast, "I do not know where you come from," is because Jesus did not become "the way" for them.

May the food and the fellowship we share here keep our feet firmly on the narrow way of the cross until we join together at the heavenly feast with people from all over the world who know the same Lord and have followed the same path.

AMEN