

A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 22A
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The twenty-first chapter of Matthew's gospel, which we have been reading from for two Sundays, depicts Jesus at his most confrontational. He's just made that triumphal entry into Jerusalem that we remember on Palm Sunday, and he knows the leaders of his faith community are gunning for him, and yet he seems to be baiting them – deliberately trying to get them as stirred up as possible. And if that's Jesus' goal, it certainly seems to work – the story we heard Jesus tell today may be the very thing that, in the end, got him killed. And it's a story that still makes us uncomfortable today, or at least it ought to. For Jesus' challenge to his own church is also a challenge to us and ours.

So who exactly is Jesus talking to, and why does it matter what he said to those people two thousand years ago? That was long ago in an alien land – we're not like them, are we? Well, the fact is, as Episcopalians, we're much more like them than we would like to believe.

The three groups Jesus is challenging are the chief priests, the elders and the Pharisees of Jerusalem. The chief priests can, of course stand in for the present-day clergy. It's a close-enough match, although the priests of Jesus' day were also the butchers and treasurers of their community as well as leading the worship. They also had a judiciary function which was much more broad than our present day clergy, who, as much as they might wish it, are not allowed to enforce church regulations or punish wrongdoers the way the High Priest of Jerusalem could.

The Elders are pretty much like our vestries – a council of advice for the priests and community.

And the Pharisees – well, the Pharisees were not priests or functionaries of the temple at all. They were a group of wealthy people who considered their lives and practices to be good examples for the rest of the assembly. They kept every one of the purity laws in the Bible, not just the “Ten Friendly Suggestions” we heard in the first reading today. They held themselves up as model citizens of church and community, and were quick to sneer at and condemn anyone who didn’t behave according to their standards.

And you probably know one or two people like that yourselves, if not here, then perhaps in your own family or workplace or in some other organization to which you belong.

So Jesus is taking to task the religious and lay leaders of his community, as well as the members with the highest social standing and best understanding of the rules and norms of the community, the “way we do things here.”

And what does Jesus take them to task for?

He’s got a long list of complaints. He calls them hypocrites who condemn the failings of others without noticing their own shortcomings. He says they have been so caught up in trying to be upright that they have forgotten how to be compassionate. In the story we heard today, he accuses them of rejecting the messengers God has sent, especially John the Baptizer and Jesus himself, and attempting to use the church for their own benefit instead of for the purpose for which God entrusted it to them.

But Jesus’ main complaint, which he makes over and over again – and this is the reason why we Episcopalians should feel particularly challenged here – is exclusivity. The

leaders of Jesus' community – priests, vestry, committee leaders, founding families; everyone with a voice in the church – have turned the community inward and closed the doors to those who are not like them. The people Jesus is hanging out with on the other hand – the poor, the outcasts, the sinners, the sick, the tax collectors and prostitutes, to use two examples Jesus mentioned in particular in last week's portion of this chapter – are the ones the church is supposed to be embracing and drawing closer to God, but Jesus' church is turning its back on them, and its leaders are condemning Jesus for helping them.

And, sad to say, the Episcopal Church has a long history of doing the same thing. We're really good at helping the needy, but generally at arm's distance. We are a charitable lot, building schools and hospitals and running shelters and raising money and sending missionaries, but when people who are different from us actually show up in our churches and parish halls at our own gatherings, we all too often use our traditions and our community standards and our polite ways to make outsiders feel as unwelcome as possible. Even as we bemoan the fact that our numbers are shrinking and we need to grow if we are to survive, we scare away the people who actually do show up because they are not the kind of people we want to share our pews and our picnics, because they are not like us.

This is, of course, a generalization about the Episcopal Church, and therefore not true of every congregation to the same degree. Some congregations embrace outsiders, and welcome change, and are growing and thriving. But nationwide the Episcopal Church grows smaller every day. Few of our children stay in church at all, let alone the church

they were raised in, when they are grown. People move away from their neighborhood churches and while they may continue to drive back on Sundays, the families who moved into the houses those members left do not always find a welcome in their churches. And church buildings that used to be buzzing with activity all week long are empty except on Sunday morning.

And what does Jesus say to the priests and elders and Pharisees of his church? He says that the reign of God; the Kingdom of Heaven, by which Jesus does not mean the place you go when you die, but rather the beloved community that we are supposed to be building here on earth, is happening anyway. The reign of God, which God intended to spread from the Temple to the whole world, has found no room to grow inside the institutional church, and so it is springing up elsewhere.

When Jesus tells the Priests and Elders that prostitutes and tax collectors are entering the kingdom ahead of them, and that the first shall be last, he's not saying that the pearly gates are closed to them. He's saying that God's community – where the poor are fed and the lame walk and the blind see and the stranger is welcomed and the outcast is at the center and every tear is wiped away is happening – God's purpose will not be denied – but it is happening somewhere else, and the people who thought they were at the center of God's embrace are going to have to go to where it's happening and they will have to be the latecomers now.

Which is not really such a bad thing, all in all. The history of Christianity is a long cycle of people hearing the call of God to live out the gospel and forming communities which grow and become institutions. These institutional churches, like all institutions, end up

putting more and more time and energy into preserving the institution, and are then challenged by the gospel that originally brought them together to turn their energy back to God's purpose.

Sometimes the challenge is a voice raised from within the community, sometimes from outside, and sometimes the challenge is structural weakening of the institution itself, but whenever the challenge is raised, the church either reforms or new communities of faith form, which may eventually supplant the old ones.

And the reason I say that's not such a bad thing is that it shows us that God never gives up; that the Word of God is never silent; that the Holy Spirit is always at work in the world. And whenever the reign of God, the beloved community, isn't growing here, it's growing somewhere else, and we are still welcome to be a part of it.

And I say all this not because I think our Episcopal Church has no future, but because I think it has a great one. As we, congregation by congregation, are recognizing that what we have been doing so artfully for almost five hundred years is not working very well anymore, Episcopal congregations all over the country, and indeed Anglican congregations all over the world are responding in exciting ways. Congregations are reaching out to the strangers that now surround them with a hospitality that recognizes that to say "you are welcome to join us if you will become like us" is the same thing as saying "you are not really welcome at all" – understanding that to welcome the stranger in the way that God has always meant for us to do means being willing to be changed by those we welcome.

And the congregations that are doing this are growing and thriving. By embracing the stories, the music, the experiences and the leadership of people whose stories and music and experiences and ideas about leadership and yes, even worship are very different from their own experiences and ideas, these congregations not only live out the gospel mandate Jesus gave us, they come to look more and more like the vision of the reign of God Jesus offers us.

These congregations are like mustard seeds; that start small and grow until they can shelter a multitude. They are like a parent with two children who honors the one who remains true to the family, but also celebrates at the return of the one who went away and comes back a stranger. They are like the ones who threw a wedding banquet, who when the guests they expected didn't show up went into the street and invited everyone they found, so that the celebration could go on.

These thriving congregations look different from most of our churches. They are more ethnically and economically diverse. They worship in ways that use the Book of Common Prayer as a framework, rather than a blueprint. They have leadership models that give not just voice but authority to all, even the newest and least immersed in the ways of the community.

But above all, these congregations, and I have visited many of them, are places of joy. In embracing the stranger, they have discovered that they are embracing God. And newcomers to these communities tend to report that instead of feeling merely welcome, they feel like they have come home.

This is what God wants for all of our congregations. This is what Jesus wanted for the Priests and Elders and Pharisees of his own community so much that he was willing to die for it. And this is where the Holy Spirit intends to lead us as well. To Joy.

Amen.