

■ Whom Do We Not Welcome or Serve?

We can come up with an extended list of those who, at one time or another, have not been welcomed, or who have been marginalized, or even rejected outright. These are generally people who have been marginalized and rejected by the dominant culture. As Loren Mead notes: “Christians are divided into the righteous and the unrighteous, and the righteous do most of the dividing.” While there are many classes and categories of people who have thus been excluded, among those who are or have been marginalized the commission recognizes four broad categories:

GENDER: Women, for far too long, have been second class citizens in the church. Not until 1969, fifty years after women’s suffrage, were females seated as deputies in the General Convention. Not until 1976 did the Episcopal Church ordain women to the priesthood. The pattern persists. Throughout the Episcopal Church, the recruitment, ordination, and placement of female clergy remains a problem.

RACE OR COLOR: People of color have long struggled for recognition in a predominantly white church. The insidious, and spiritually corrosive, sin of racism continues to infect both church and society. Racism affects not only African-Americans, but also Hispanic-Americans, Native Americans, and Asian-Americans. The commission notes with concern the crisis represented by the disproportionate loss of Episcopalians of color.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: Homosexual men and women have been systematically barred from full participation in the life of the church or have been shunted into marginal communities even when they have not faced outright ostracism.

AGE: At both ends of the scale, the church marginalizes people of different ages. We worship youth, and ignore our children when it comes to involving them fully in the life and ministry of the parish. We claim to respect the wisdom of our older members, but again ignore them when it suits us.

The task of the church, if it is to be true to the precepts of its lord and master who was vilified by the dominant culture because he ate and drank with “tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 5:30), is to reach out to those at the margins of society. This can only be accomplished if the church truly becomes a compassionate community. A caring community is, by definition, a compassionate community.

The compassionate community sees its ministry not simply in the alleviation of pain, but as a means to enlarge its vision and to embrace fully the Great Commission to go out and spread the Gospel to all the world. The theologian Walter Brueggemann speaks eloquently to this point:

Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt [of exclusion and rejection] is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.

The late Henri Nouwen expands this theme:

A Christian community is . . . a healing community, not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision. Mutual confession then becomes a mutual deepening of hope, and sharing weakness becomes a reminder to one and all of the coming strength.

Jesus Christ leads us to a new vision. The vision is realized not by retreating into some inner spiritual sanctum where we become detached from the cares and occupations of the world, but by entering into the pain and suffering of the world to minister to that hurt.

What Stops Us From Doing This?

There are many reasons why we do not practice this radical ministry of hospitality to which Jesus Christ calls us. We have a deep-seated fear of “the other.” In this we are not unique. The Hebrew community had to be reminded time and again to care for the stranger. So do we. Like them, we find the “we-they” dichotomy all too convenient:

- “They” are not like “us.”
- “They” are not as hardworking, or as dedicated as we are.
- We find convenient excuses not to serve “them”:
They are smelly and obnoxious, and they appear to be “dangerous”;
It’s their fault - if only they worked harder/weren’t so lazy/didn’t drink/weren’t on drugs

The problem with all these excuses and attitudes is that they run contrary to the vision of human society that Jesus gave us. When he fed the five thousand, he did not institute a means test or ask whether they were somehow “deserving.” He simply said, “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat,” (Mark 8:2) and then he fed them. That was the vision he gave us of the caring, compassionate community. But we are in danger of losing that vision, and because our vision is no longer intact, we have become a community that has forgotten its intended nature. We have developed rather like the community that arose around the great Hasidic rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov.

The Baal Shem Tov would take his disciples to a quiet place in the forest. There they would light a fire and, as they danced around the fire, the rabbi would lead them in the most uplifting prayers, lifting them into a sublime state of ecstasy. After the death of the saint, the disciples continued to go to the spot in the forest, light the fire and dance. But they could not remember the prayers and in time they forgot the dance, and later no longer even lit the fire. Finally, even the spot where he had led them faded from memory.

In like fashion, we have lost our memory. We join the same Pharisees, whom Jesus berated so severely, in their behavior. We have forgotten what it is like to live eucharistically, to set our lives in a context of thanksgiving. We have forgotten “the gift of joy and wonder in all [God’s] works” (Service of Holy Baptism, Book of Common Prayer, page 308). As the recently retired Dean of Westminster notes: “Once wonder goes; once mystery is dismissed; once the holy and numinous count for nothing; then human life becomes cheap and it is possible with a single bullet to shatter that most miraculous thing, a human skull, with scarcely a second thought.”

Because we have lost this sense of wonder, our community, our coming together, is largely based on fear. As some cynic has suggested, the church is the biggest fire insurance agency in the world. Our fears are manifold:

We fear the unknown, and because “they” are not like “us,” “they” are different from “us,” we fear “them.” Because we fear “them,” we hold “them” at arms’ length because only then do we feel safe. We fear change. We live in a changing world where the pace of change has become so rapid that we look at our community of faith to protect us from change. Intellectually, we assent to change, but at heart-we want to stay the same. We do not want to plunge into that world where we encounter change directly and where we might be changed in ways that we would find uncomfortable.

We fear uncertainty. We like things to be stable and certain. We like our liturgy to have no surprises. We reject the prayer of Dom Helder Camara in which he begs God to “Change our lives, shatter our complacency,” let alone “Take away the quietness of a clear conscience.”

We fear revealing our feelings, and therefore we do not express them. And yet God calls us to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). Because we do not, this leads us into a rejection of that compassionate response to which Jesus calls’ us.

We fear loss. Especially do we fear the loss of security. We have lost the ability to say, with Teresa of Avila, “I thank God for all the things I do not have.” We fear losing what we have. When confronted with the “have-nots,” we become afraid because we see in them the mirror of our own potential failure.

We have become a community of self-affirmation, not redemption. We have forgotten how to live eucharistically. Less and less do we come together in a re-remembering to be broken and shared at the altar and then go out into the world, to give thanks to our gracious Creator and Savior, and to serve in his name. We feel that it is better to be served than to serve and that as long as we service the needs of the members of our congregations, we are serving Christ. We are graciously benign. Our selfishness and self-righteousness have led us to a renunciation of the core values of our baptism. In so doing, we have become practical atheists. All too often we do our works out of a *sense of obligation* rather than compassion. *We take refuge in* pious posturings where we prefer hierarchy to relationship, promote stereotypes to defend our positions, and tolerate differences rather than accept them.

Finally, as a church, we have adopted corporate values. Wall Street has come to dominate Jerusalem. We believe, whether implicitly or explicitly, in winning at all costs. We believe that bigger is better, and biggest is best; that success is the measure of the person; that money is the measure of all things; and even that might is right. We dress for success (one has only to look at any Episcopal congregation to see the truth of this). We have come to believe that one is what one does, and that one’s professional status, and above all one’s wealth, are the marks of one’s value to the community. As one commission member noted, “Ours is a struggle for the souls of our people vis-a-vis the values of our culture and the values of our church. We are too absorbed by the values of power and being big. We reward people for being successful in the values of the culture. We need the standards of the servant community, not a success community.”

These are the parameters that prevent us from truly ministering to the needy. These are the values that have fomented the “we-they” false dichotomy and which prevent us from seeing those who are materially less fortunate than ourselves as our own brothers and sisters. These are the structures which make the poor among us, the strangers at our gates, all but invisible.

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