

4th Sunday After the Epiphany

January 30, 2022

Year C RCL

Jeremiah 1:4-10

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 14:21-30

The Outcast

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, an outcast is a person who has been rejected by society or a social group. Synonyms include pariah, persona non grata, exile, and refugee. Today's Gospel tells us how Jesus, a revered teacher, and scholar, becomes an outcast in his hometown of Nazareth. One moment, the synagogue members exclaim with amazement how gracious he is. Not too long after, they are driving him out of the town and preparing to hurl him off a cliff, thereby casting him out of their community. Why? What did he do?

He told them the truth. Jesus, like all prophets, was gifted with "profound moral insight and exceptional powers of expression."¹ He performed miracles and preached the good news as God directed in places where those gifts were needed and might be welcomed. Nazareth was not one of those places. Jesus knew that they would never accept him or the work God was ordaining him to do. He would never be allowed to be his authentic self, the person God knew Jesus was destined to be long before he came to life in Mary's womb.

¹ American Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition

A Gospel lesson like this one invites us to deeply explore the connections between our lives and what scripture says about Jesus' experiences. In this story, Jesus goes from being respected to being rejected. Over the years, I have heard many stories of people whose families, religious communities, and friends made them outcasts. Sometimes it was because someone came out and shared their authentic identity. Sometimes it was because someone fell in love and wanted to make a life with someone from a different culture or ethnicity. And, sometimes, it was because upon exploring their spiritual truth, the person came to believe that their faith community values and their own were no longer aligned. Whatever the reason, they all talked about the pain they carry from having been cut off from a group of people they once loved and for whom they cared.

In today's polarized political environment, people share what it is like to go to what were once happy family occasions, with a mental list of what not to talk about lest it fracture a fragile peace. Once highly valued as foundations for trust, truth and authenticity are becoming two-edged swords. If one tells the truth, everyone wants to hear, okay. If the truth becomes a subject for debate, well, lookout. One wonders, how authentic can I be? What if my views are different? How safe is it to share any or all of who I am and what I believe with these people? Becoming an outcast may be immediate or happen over time as one becomes increasingly fearful and diminished by people they once trusted. However it happens, becoming an outcast is a

distressing experience because people are raised with the belief that belonging is an essential element for survival.

This quote is attributed to the poet Robert Frost, “Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” In some families, this is true. Home is a haven where one is welcome and can be who they are.

Conversations include a variety of ideas and differences of opinion. People lovingly agree to disagree. Love is present in all the ways described in 1st Corinthians. People are kind, patient, and they rejoice in the truth. Folk do not insist on having only their way, and they are not irritable or resentful.

Home may be a family of origin. Home could be a family of choice comprised of friends. The very definition of home means that no one is an outcast. One is accepted and beloved as they are.

At its best, the church is a spiritual home where truth, love, and authenticity abound, and all are welcome. I remember the first time I heard Pastor Stephen say (I will paraphrase), “whoever you are and wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you have a home here at Incarnation.” It is a profound statement because it confirms our congregation seeks to ensure that we have no outcasts here.

Churches, including this one, however, are not perfect. And many people come through our doors from faith communities that have made it difficult to ever again trust in or believe the things said and done in the name of God. Sometimes they may share their outcast story with us, and when they do, it is

helpful to listen respectfully and recognize how vulnerable it may be for them to tell about their experiences. There is a lot more to say by people wiser than me about ways to be there for people and how to listen to those who have been hurt. These are essential skills, and learning and practicing them takes time.

As I continue to ponder the lessons of this Gospel story, I wonder how Jesus felt about the Nazorean congregants after they tried to kill him. The Gospel passage for today tells us that he “passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” We will never know if he was saddened or hurt by the experience. We will never know if he ever carried any trauma from that event. We only know that he went on his way and continued to be the prophet God equipped him to be. I choose to believe that Jesus forgave them.

Why do we cast people out of our lives? I believe that almost every societal ill comes from the absence of love. Without love, there is no justice, there is no truth, there is no honor, there is no equity, there is no acceptance, and there is no freedom.

If we do not love our neighbors as ourselves, we must face the truth of who we are and what we have done and ask for forgiveness. Acknowledging the harm, we cause others becomes part of our reconciliation with God and our neighbor.

Desmond Tutu said, “Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are not about pretending that things are other than they

are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking, but in the end, it is worthwhile because only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing.”

I will end with this statement about our church and the work of the beloved community. “As the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, we dream and work to foster Beloved Communities where all people may experience dignity and abundant life and see themselves and others as beloved children of God. The Becoming Beloved Community Vision Document and accompanying resources help us to understand and take up the long-term commitments necessary to form loving, liberating, and life-giving relationships with each other. Together, we are growing as reconcilers, justice-makers, and healers in the name of Christ.”²

I think it is safe to say that there are no outcasts in the Beloved Community.

² Source: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/beloved-community/>. Retrieved January 30, 2022.