

SEND THEM AWAY

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Critics of our Church say that we downplay the gospel
in favor of inclusiveness.
But inclusiveness is at the heart of the gospel.

That's why Jesus was always sharing table fellowship
with people the good religious folks shunned.
In today's lesson from Ephesians,
Paul develops the Jesus' example of inclusiveness
into a profound teaching about how we are saved.

Christians connect with God through relationship with each other.
The bread and wine are not magic infusions of God.
It is the common cup, the one loaf that make the difference.
It is the eating and drinking together that matters.
It's a sign of our connection to God through each other.
Christian faith reconciles estranged people into the one family of God.
That is what the Church is here to do.

Paul writes to the Gentile Ephesians:

“(You were once) aliens from the commonwealth of Israel,
strangers to the covenant of promise . . .
But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off
have been brought near by the blood of Christ . . .”

Paul says Jesus is about bringing making a family out of strangers.

“(Jesus) has made both groups into one,” Paul writes.
We often speak as if God was mostly concerned about making laws
to separate the good from the evil, the in from the out.
In truth, God is more concerned with love than law.

Paul says – now listen to how shocking this truly is – he says:

“(Jesus) has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, //
that he might create in himself one new humanity . . .
thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God
in one body . . .”

It isn't about the rules. It's about the relationships.

Most of us have a touch of legalism in us,
so this may be unsettling.
It's fine with us for Jesus to abolish the laws we don't like,
but Paul says he has abolished all the religious laws.
We want some rules. They tell us where we stand.
They separate the good guys from the bad guys.

We want rules and that's ok.
The world is perfectly free to make rules.
The secular social order needs rules.
But making rules into religion or making a religion out of rules
is not the New Testament way.

It isn't about the rules. It's about the relationships.
It's about the relationships we form and we acknowledge
at this communion rail.
It's human nature makes to cozy up to the people
who make us feel comfortable,
and keep our distance from the ones who bother us.
But Christ unites us with people who bother us.
That's why in churches throughout history, some people
are usually trying to push other people out.
We see it in Paul's letters:
In Galatia, it was the Judaizers vs. the liberals;
in Corinth it was the ascetics vs. the libertines;
in Rome it was the Jews vs. the Gentiles.

How much easier it would have been to follow the way
of the modern Church

– splitting and splitting and splitting again
over whatever disagreements may arise.

Galatia could have had the First Judaizer Christian Church
and the Christian Church of Let The Gentiles Be Themselves.

Corinth could have had a First Libertine Christian Church
and a First Ascetic Christian Church.

The Jews and Gentiles of Rome could have worshiped Jesus
each in their own way, each in their own building.

But then none of them would have been fully Christian.
They would have given up on the Christian project
of being the Temple of God.

Listen to what Paul says:

“You are no longer strangers and aliens,
but are . . . members of the household of God . . .
In him the whole structure is joined together
and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”

He is saying that in Jesus we have become family, one family.
We are not aliens or strangers to one another.

It doesn't matter whether we agree or disagree,
whether we approve of each other or not,
even whether we like each other or not.

We are family – and not just any family.
We are God's family – God's household and holy temple.

God lives – not in the book, not in the bread and wine,
and (sorry New Agers) not in each of us individually –
God lives in the relational space among us.
Paul says – and this is the most important verse –

“You also are being built together spiritually
into a dwelling place for God.”//

When we offer shelter and support to the family
of someone in the hospital,
we don't check their political ideology first.
When we send a shawl to someone who is grieving,
we don't send a theological questionnaire.
When we serve food to the homeless,
we don't make them pray and sing for their supper.

In the Diocese of Jerusalem,
there are orphanages and hospitals for Jews;
and there are orphanages and hospitals for Muslims.
But the Anglican orphanages and hospitals
are for people of any persuasion.
That's the Christian way.

Our Epistle lesson sheds a special light on today's Gospel.
Jesus and the apostles, the special inner circle of his disciples,
had gone away for retreat, but the crowd found them.
So Jesus taught the crowd.

The apostles didn't much like having
their special time with Jesus invaded.
They were patient until evening. Then they said to Jesus,

“Send the crowd away so they can go to the villages
to buy food.”

Presumably the Apostles were right.
The crowd would not have starved.
They could have divided up and gone away to buy food,
one group in this village, another group in that village,
and other groups in other villages.
They would not have starved.

So the apostle said to Jesus, “Send them away.”
But Jesus said, “You give them something to eat.
Keep them here with us.”
Being the church would be so much easier

if we could be a small group of intimate friends
– not having our comfortable time together
intruded upon by outsiders.

It would be so much easier to escape here,
to make the church a place to retreat
from life's burdens and the world's controversies --
if we could just relax with each other and Jesus.
But the crowd shows up.
It shows up as lonely, hurting people seeking a community.
It shows up as confused people
lost in the swirling multiplicity of today's
philosophies, religions, and self-help solutions.
It shows up as youth at risk needing mentors
and children needing someone to teach them to read.

It would be so much easier to just say, "Send them away."
People are easily sent away.
But Jesus says, "Give them something to eat."

Is that because he cares for the outsiders
more than he cares for us,
more than he cares about our need for quiet, rest,
and small group intimacy?
Maybe. But there's another possibility.
Maybe he knows we need them.

Maybe they are essential parts of this dwelling place for God.
Maybe we need each other in order
to become God's earthly home.
Maybe the church is not fully itself without them.
We are not fully ourselves without them.
And maybe our spiritual health depends
on the presence of these outsiders.

Paul says, that we are "being built together spiritually
into a dwelling place for God."
And that is what it's all about.
Over the centuries, we have shrunk the Christian faith
into something small-minded and simplistic.
We have gotten the idea that it's a test
in which those who get the answers right go to heaven
and the losers go to hell.
But the New Testament says hardly anything about going to heaven.

In John's Gospel, the whole purpose of Christianity
is to live in God and invite God to live in us
just as the Father and the Son live in each other.
We are to be the Incarnation, and therein lies our salvation

– not just our pardon and escape from punishment,
but our wholeness, our destiny, and our joy.

So how do we invite God to live in us?

Paul says, that we are “being built together spiritually
into a dwelling place for God.”

That tells us one thing about being a dwelling place for God.

We do it together or not at all.

Amen.