

And Now It Begins
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Welcome to the first church fight and guess what, it is about who is in and who is out. This argument started with Peter, Paul and James and has been fought for almost 2000 years.

Reminds me of the coaster I have in my office. "Jesus loves you, but I'm his favorite." That attitude runs throughout Christianity today in our arguments about who is right and who is in. This in effect is part of the fight in today's passage. It wasn't so much that he had spread the good news to the Gentile, but that he had treated them as equal. In fact he said that they were just as good as the boys from the Temple.

You're bringing them to church? Imagine if you will that Peter has returned to report to the evangelism committee about his work. Well let's see today I converted a Roman centurion and his family. He's a God fearer, that's a specific term for a non-Jew who believed in God. I have heard that he was well spoken of, but he isn't among the chosen. Yet I had a vision and heard God tell me that I was to go to him. So I went entered his house, ate with him and told him the Good News. The Spirit came upon them and I baptized them. By the way in that vision God also told me that all of our old dietary laws do not really matter.

Now imagine if you can the points in this report when he would have begun to lose his audience. He has a vision and God tells him to go to meet a Gentile family. He enters into a house that is not kosher and therefore makes himself and his companions ritually impure. Also since he has come back without any purification rites he has contaminated everybody in the meeting. He welcomes these others into the church, baptizes them of all things and then reports that the old dietary laws are not needed.

It is hard to describe to our world today how difficult and controversial this problem of admitting Gentiles into the church was. I will let you think about the question of who is so different that you would not let them become part of us. In the meantime here is a little more contemporary example.

When Ghandi was asked why he rejected Jesus Christ he replied, "Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Apparently Ghandi's rejection of Christianity grew out of an incident that happened when he was a young man practicing law in South Africa. He had become attracted to the Christian faith, had studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and was seriously exploring becoming a Christian. And so he decided to attend a church service. As he came up the steps of the large church where he intended to go, a white South African elder of the

church barred his way at the door. "Where do you think you're going, kaffir?" the man asked Gandhi in a belligerent tone of voice.

Ghandi replied, "I'd like to attend worship here."

The church elder snarled at him, "There's no room for kaffirs in this church. Get out of here or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps."

From that moment, Ghandi said, he decided to adopt what good he found in Christianity, but would never again consider becoming a Christian if it meant being part of the church.

I do not how many of you have ever heard that story, but this is clearly the opposite approach from the one Peter took. It may however have been the approach of those already inside the circle. The ones who believed that they were chosen by God and superior to others. Those folks might be willing to wear that T-shirt I referenced earlier.

Wendy as an adjunct professor at a Jesuit college often taught intro to religion classes. The Roman Catholic students frequently asked her, if Protestants were Christians. Or at least they were astonished to find out that they were. In fact this acknowledgement was one of the major points of Vatican 2 if my memory serves me correctly. Even today we are not permitted to receive the Eucharist in a Roman Catholic Church. So while God loves us, others are his favorite.

When faced with this type of sentiment I always come around to one question, "and who would Jesus exclude." Who did Jesus send away from the table? Who did Jesus refuse to heal? Now some, like the rich young man, turn away because the price of following Jesus is too high. That however is their choice, Jesus has not told them to go away, but he has told them that there is a price to being a Christian and you can choose to pay that price or not.

Another thing to consider is how do we put up barriers to people. How do we make others feel unwelcome, whether we do it intentionally or unintentionally? I was thinking yesterday during a funeral where we had to juggle prayer book, hymnal, song book and service bulletin how that feels to someone not familiar with our service.

Look though what our gospel teaches us. Love each other as I have loved you. Make no mistake the word love is agape, the love of God. Not friendship, not desire, but we are commanded to have the love of God for each other. Again, the issue of who is included is raised by some who ask, "who is the other."

Those people would rewrite the bumper sticker I have over my desk. This is the one that says, "God Bless Everyone, No Exceptions." Some would rewrite that to sound like a credit card offer and say "God Bless Everyone, Certain restrictions apply." A friend of mine had that on her car which she had just parked in the lot at church on her way to the office. The head of her altar guild walked behind, looked at the bumper sticker, looked at her, looked back at the bumper sticker shook her head and said, "I think not." How many people had

this person knowingly or unknowingly turned away from that church. There is not much difference between her and the man at the door of the church in South Africa who turned Ghandi away.

Now some would choose to draw that circle as small as possible. To stay safe in a tight knit community, but I do not think that is what Jesus would have us do. This certainly is not what Peter or Paul did as they spread Christianity throughout the world. We are a separate religion from Judaism today because at the council of Jamnia the Pharisees declared that those who accepted Christ as the Messiah are outside of the circle. It was from that point that we truly went our separate ways.

When we draw lines that declare who is in and who is out, we risk diminishing ourselves. In fact I would say that we do not risk it, but actually do diminish our ability to spread the Gospel. In Matthew we are told to preach the gospel to the whole world. Not some of the world, not just those who look or think like us, but to all. That is a great challenge.

So I return to let you ponder the question I asked earlier in this sermon. Who is so different that their coming into our community would you give you pause to wonder, "are they welcome here?" Do I want them in my parish? Then sit down with Jesus and have a little talk with him and ask, "LORD, what do you want me to do?"