

There's an article in last week's "Christian Century" magazine about contemporary styles of church membership. It's a good time of year for such an article. There are always a number of folks who seem to return to church at this time of year. But this article is about the commitment gap. It appears that it takes an average of six years for visitors to join a church. "More Americans are rejecting denominational identities . . . joining something is becoming increasingly irrelevant too."

I see people struggling with issues of joining. Like pledging—probably the main flag or sign of membership, can be a very difficult step for many people to take. The article talks about mixed marriages and the complex negotiation that is inevitably entailed as those who come from different backgrounds try to find a workable way to embrace a church as a family.

We, of course, labor in this cultural context and struggle to meet the needs and match the expectations of all sorts of people hoping thereby to attract new members, people who will feel drawn to our life together in Christ. Often, I find, the good intentions that people begin with, are not enough to sustain the discipline of membership and attendance over time. After all, church attendance is not supported by our cultural lifestyle. And more and more people are coming to churches with little or no experience of belonging to a congregation and no doubt finding its ways challenging.

But a gospel passage like today's causes me to wonder if there isn't something deeper than cultural competition and inertial resistance that we are contending with in seeking to attract and hold onto new members. I wonder if, as here in Matthew with John the Baptist, it isn't the radical discontinuity between what newcomers think Christ and religion is all about and what Jesus as the scripture reveals him is really up to that is the obstacle.

"Are you the one who is to come?" asks John from his prison cell, through his followers. Having provoked the Tetrarch Herod, publicly accusing him of unlawful immorality for taking his brother's wife as his own, he now finds himself languishing in chains. This is not the way the prophet John heard it when he baptized Jesus as the Messiah, the one "who is to come" to save his people. Where is the "axe laid to the root of the tree" of Israel? Where is the pitchfork and the fire to consume the enemies of God and purify the nation?

Jesus' healing ministry and preaching of peace has become an offense to John, a stumbling block. He is fixated on that lone verse from the portion of Isaiah we heard today:

Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

John from the despair of his prison has forgotten the visionary hope, the mission of the one who comes to prepare the way not by judgment and violence but by suffering on behalf of the people. So he asks Jesus, "Are we to wait for another?" Jesus' response is masterful. "Go and tell John what you hear and see." He points to the fruit of his ministry so that they must witness to John out of their own experience.

Not every congregation is right for every newcomer. But the real issue is not the good works we do or see done, or even whether we are better people because we have gone to church or joined St. Stephen's. It is Communion. The real issue is our life lived in communion with God, with one another, and ultimately with those beyond, our families and neighbors, our friends, co-workers and even our enemies. Let me take the example of the martyred monks of Tribhirine who consciously developed a spirituality of Communion in Algeria surrounded by Moslem neighbors and a growing threat from Islamic terrorists. Not trying to convert their neighbors, they were a presence of caring love, a witness of Communion.

The vocation to congregational life is not unlike that to a monastic life. It must be lived in the crucible of interpersonal relationships. And though people who find themselves drawn to go to church may expect spiritual power and fiery preaching or may secretly or unconsciously long for healing, it is Communion that is the miraculous substance of our life together in Christ. When we welcome the newcomer or the stranger, when we honor by our hospitality those who are different, even disturbingly, fearfully, or dangerously different than we are, it is into Communion with the God who is Communion that we welcome them.

A stability that inspires hope, a witness to the surprising love of the other, and the appreciation of difference, these are things that this Communion forms in us. Our Eucharistic worship is not only the source and deepening of our Communion it is also the display or manifestation of that Communion. The Windsor Report defines Communion as "mutual relationships of interdependence and autonomy." That the behavior of the Episcopal Church and of the Anglican Church of Canada in welcoming gay and lesbian people and their relationships as true partners in Communion, that is with all the dignity of "mutual relationships

of interdependence and autonomy,” has scandalized many in the worldwide Anglican Church should not surprise us.

That’s how John reacted to the peaceful, accepting, non-judgmental ministry of Jesus. He was scandalized. He could not recognize in Jesus’ behavior the Kingdom he expected of the God of judgment he proclaimed. And after Jesus points to the joy-filled signs of the New Creation he cautions them about further scandal. He says, “Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.” And then he does an amazing thing. Rather than becoming caught in scandalous rivalry with John, Jesus praises him—but with a difference. He adds to words of the highest earthly praise for John that the “least in the kingdom is greater than John.”

“Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at (is not scandalized by) me.” Offense, in Gk. skandala, a stumbling block or obstacle, is perhaps the best Biblical definition of broken communion. When Jesus freely and purposely goes to the cross, his followers are “scandalized.” They cannot go with him any further. They betray him, lose their faith and doubt their own original recognition of him as the Messiah. He does not meet their expectations of a Godly, holy, religious man. In their eyes, from the greatest he has sunk to become the least. And like John they break communion. It’s not until the resurrection when Jesus appears to them personally alive as forgiveness, that they are able to be reconciled and begin to have it dawn on them that their own misrepresentation of God as the violent judge and their misidentification of the messiah as his avenger is what crucified their Lord. And it is still dawning on us.

This is a difficult path, this way of the cross, but every follower of Jesus and every enquirer who belongs to our life together in a congregation is bound to experience scandal in one way or another. Every newcomer should be forewarned. Communion with Christ and with us means death before it means resurrection. When this begins to become clear, it can cause the best intentioned person to turn back from following, to find reasons not to meet together to share the Lord’s Supper, because after all in that meal we show forth not his life but his “death,” Our communion with him and with one another and with the world is deepened by our identification as the least with him in his death.

To the world Death is the final arbiter. The death of Jesus by the world’s reckoning is a tragic failure, a scandal down to this day. But for the Trappist monks of Tibhirine in the Atlas Mountains of Algeria and their abbot Dom Christian de Cherge who lived together a spirituality of communion, the death they foresaw at the hands of terrorists was nothing but joy. After a narrow escape, when the fate of many other Christians and foreigners in Algeria and the alarm of their friends and families made it impossible to avoid the inevitability of martyrdom, Dom Christian crafted with the help of the brothers with whom he

lived a statement, written two years before the fact, of their conscious intention, should it be the case, to suffer violence out of love for their neighbors and the enemies who would kill them. In part, this is what he wrote:

Obviously, my death will appear to confirm
those who hastily judged me naïve or idealistic:
"Let him tell us now what he thinks of his ideals!"
But these persons should know that finally
my most avid curiosity will be set free.

This is what I shall be able to do, God willing:
immerse my gaze in that of the Father
to contemplate with him His children of Islam
just as He sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ,
the fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit
whose secret joy will always be to establish communion
and restore the likeness, playing with the differences.
For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs,
I thank God, who seems to have willed it entirely for the sake of that JOY
in everything and in spite of everything.
In this THANK YOU,
which is said for everything in my life from now on,
I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today,
and you, my friends of this place,
along with my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their
families,
You are the hundredfold granted as was promised!
And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you
were doing:
Yes, I want this THANK YOU and this GOODBYE to be a "GOD-
BLESS" for you, too,
because in God's face I see yours.
May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise,
if it please God, the Father of us both.

AMEN! INCHALLAH!

In an ironic echo of John's fate, only their heads were found to bury.

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