

On Welcoming the Imperfect

John 10:22-30

Our gospel lesson for the day opens with John telling us it is time for the Festival of Dedication. Over the centuries, this festival has evolved into what we know as Hanukkah. It commemorates events that occurred about a century and a half before the birth of Christ. Since Hanukkah is usually in November or December some Christians mistakenly think of it as Jewish Christmas. It is not. If anything, the meaning of Hanukkah comes closer to the Fourth of July than to Christmas. Both celebrate revolutions that resulted in setting people free from an oppressive outsider.

Briefly, here is the story. About three and a half centuries before Jesus was born, Alexander the Great came to rule Judea. Unlike some rulers, Alexander wanted more than taxes from those he conquered. He wanted to change the culture, the religion, the language, and the hearts of the people as well as to collect heavy taxes. Toward that end, Alexander the Great pushed for Greek ways of worshiping, speaking, thinking, and doing.

Over the next couple centuries, Greek ways seeped into and began to replace Jewish ways. The distinctiveness of the Jewish people was being lost. Things came to a head in 167 BCE when Antiochus IV, the one currently in the line of Alexander the Great, appointed his own person to be the high priest. Whereas the Jews believed the high priest should be called by God, Antiochus IV considered the job just another political appointment. Antiochus put his own man in office and then, among other things, began to require that pigs be sacrificed on the high altar.

This desecration of the Altar with swine blood was more than any self-respecting Jew could tolerate. Faithful Jews were outraged. Led by the family of the legitimate high priest, a revolution erupted. Eventually what was called the Maccabean revolt was triumphant. The Jews drove the occupiers from their temple and their country. The Jewish people rejoiced because their God Yahweh had once again delivered them from their enemies.

They began to purge Greek influence from their community life and faith practices. At the top of the priority list was the ritual purification of the temple. That required first lighting the eternal flame representing the presence of God in the temple. However, the supply of special oil for the eternal flame was nearly exhausted. They could find only oil enough for a single day and it took eight days to purify a new supply. By faith, lit the lamp and started the eight-day purification process. They were confident that the God would sustain the eternal flame until the oil supply could be replenished. The oil for a single day burned for eight days.

What happened in 167 BCE cannot be applied as a template for every era and circumstance. That caveat is at the heart of today's gospel reading. The Romans were occupying Jerusalem. The Romans were more interested in political control and tax collecting than desecrating the temple. However, Judeans had learned the importance of vigilance. Jewish faith practices must never again be mocked. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees, not the Maccabees, were the ones in charge of keeping Jewish faith practices pure.

John told us that Jesus was walking in the temple. One of the Pharisees bent close enough to Jesus that the master caught a whiff of moldy breath and rudely asked, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my father's name testify to me" ... "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me" ... "No one will snatch them out of my hand" ... "The Father and I are one".

Let me suggest a way to understand this interchange. I don't think the Pharisees really wanted to know "if" Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus had already answered that question. They wanted to know what type of messiah he planned to be. Was Jesus going to be in the mold of Judah Maccabee? Did Jesus plan to drive out the Romans the way Judah Maccabee drove out the Greeks? Did he support the Pharisees and the religion police in their efforts to purge society of every religiously impure person and negative influence? If that was Jesus' objective, the Pharisees just might support him. Their concern was that Jesus had not shown much interest in purging

impurity. He had drawn his closest followers from the lowest ranks of ordinary people. He associated with tax collectors and Gentiles. He treated women as valued children of God. He failed to condemn the Romans with sufficient enthusiasm. He seemed not to care about keeping sabbath rules. They wanted a Messiah committed to purging impurity. The Pharisees remembered what they had learned from Antiochus IV and the desecration of the temple.

To paraphrase Jesus' response: "Hey fellows, I just preach, and people respond. Like sheep respond to the voice of the shepherd, they hear my voice and come. Rather than judging, I welcome people as children of a loving God, and I base that welcome simply on the fact they come." Jesus did not exclude those the Pharisees deemed impure.

Jesus continued by saying, "The Father and I are one." In this context, I take that to mean, "God and I are on the same page on this matter. The Pharisees wanted to emphasize purging the impure. Jesus wanted to emphasize reaching out and even welcoming the imperfect. The Pharisees wanted to draw the circle to shut some out. They wanted to say, "You and you and you are all right — but you can't come." Jesus, on the other hand, wanted to draw the circle to include all people. Jesus was a "y'all come" sort of fellow.

There is said to be a congregation so committed to the core value of hospitality that they include the following in their Sunday bulletin each week. Welcome to this church. We welcome those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, "o no habla inglés." We offer a special welcome to the crying newborn, to those skinny as a rail, as well as to those who could afford to lose a few pounds.

We will welcome you if you can sing like an angel, but we will also welcome you if you can't carry a note in a bucket. You're welcome here if you're "just browsing," just woke up, or just got out of jail. To those who can claim they were an "Every Sunday Attender" where they used to live and to those who seldom darken the door of any church, we say, "Come on in."

You are welcome here if you are a teenager growing up too fast or if you over seventy and never grew up. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, and junk-food eater

We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We are especially equipped here at this church to welcome you if you are "down in the dumps" or having some sort of life crisis. In this congregation you can probably find at least one person able to identify with your struggle — purely from personal experience.

If you happen to be one of those folks who just does not like "organized religion," you will love this church. This congregation has raised being "unorganized" to an art form.

We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, are looking for work, or never intend to find a job. We will welcome you even if you just blew your last paycheck at the casino.

We will welcome you if can't spell or have illegible handwriting. We welcome those who are inked, pierced, or both. We will even welcome you if your tattoos are illegible or have misspellings. Perhaps you came to church this morning because grandma is visiting. She wanted to go to church, and she needed a ride. Welcome. If you got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake, welcome.

We especially welcome those who could use a prayer right now or those who had religion shoved down their throats as kids. We welcome tourists, seekers, doubters and bleeding hearts, but we especially welcome you!

I suspect if we gave it a little thought, we might be able to add a few more categories to that congregation's list of who is welcome.

The scripture teaches us that we are all children of the same parent God, and we are called to love one another. By faith we are called to be on the side of drawing circles to include rather than to exclude. Exactly how that works, I must confess, I don't fully understand. On the other hand, I don't understand how a one-day supply of oil burned for eight days. It is just one of those wondrous things. Some folks call those amazing happenings the miracles of a loving, faithful God.

Brothers and sisters, y'all come. We are all the children of God. Amen and amen.