

May 29, 2022, The Seventh Sunday of Easter: Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21

At the beginning of the movie “Animal House,” two freshmen enter the most prestigious fraternity on campus during pledge week. The two young men, one overweight, child-like and none too bright, the other short, scrawny, and bookish, are warmly greeted by the fraternity’s handsome pledge chairman. They are introduced to other fraternity brothers and gently guided to an area with other young men who because of appearance, demeanor, race, or ethnicity are unacceptable to the fraternity. Each time one of the outcasts attempts to circulate, they are smoothly guided back to “the lepers’ corner.” The herd has been culled, with social grace, without fuss; no harsh words, no demands to leave. However benevolent, the rejection is obvious.

Every church thinks itself friendly, warm, and welcoming. This is correct: that is, the members are friendly to those with whom they are friendly. Yet as with the movie fraternity, we can—without being consciously conscious—relegate some to a “they-are-not-us” category. This is hardly limited to Episcopal Churches.

Our first thought might be that what is needed is an organized program for greeting, meeting, and assimilating new people into the parish: form a committee, identify goals, recruit helpers, decide tasks, and responsibilities; chart progress, report to the congregation, hold the Vestry and priest responsible. Sometimes such things work, for a while. One trouble I have with such an approach is that it has just about nothing to do with friendship. Usually, it has nothing to do with why we are doing all this stuff in the first place.

The second reading today gives us the why. Is it not unexpectedly awesome that the New Testament ends with an invitation: *The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.*” (v 17). The Spirit of God—wild, irrepressible—cries out to all, “Come!” The Bride is the Church whose one ministry is to proclaim with every breath, word and action: “*Jesus is Lord!*”. The Spirit and the Bride are one voice proclaiming to all, “Come!” Come to the living waters and be overcome by the Coming One in whom you will never thirst again.

The invitation is indiscriminate: It is for *everyone who is thirsty* (v17). It is for all men and women, all boys and girls, all teenagers; the lovable and unlovable; those who have it all together and those who have nothing together; everyone, everywhere; even those in the ‘lepers’ corner.’ *Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift.* This all-embracing invitation can be ignored, to our peril, but not misinterpreted: everyone means everyone, anyone means anyone.

I will be blunt: I do not want to hear any whining about “I’m too shy...I can’t do it.” I am the most introverted, socially awkward person you have ever met in your life. If you doubt me, ask my wife! It has taken me years to learn and practice being awkwardly comfortable with interacting with people I don’t know, with talking to people at receptions and such gatherings. If I can manage somehow in at least some situations, you can too. The fact is, we act on what is important to us. You are the invitation others receive. You can pretend it isn’t so but is the case.

The work of invitation and hospitality is at once simple and challenging. The simplicity is this: live the invitation, live the Gospel; love the Father, glorify the Son, be filled with the Holy Spirit; honor, respect, and serve one another; do not gossip or complain; build others up; do works of mercy; say your prayers, come to worship, read your Bible and holy authors; welcome everyone, be hospitable; make a place in your life for others; befriend someone you do not know; talk to our children, especially teenagers. What makes this challenging is the fact that this is not a program done for us for which someone else is accountable. To be a follower of Jesus Christ means we are responsible for our own corporate life.

The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift. This is our mission: to live the invitation that life is not rich or joyful or complete without Jesus Christ; to live the hope that as good, or bad, as anyone’s life is today, there is so much more joy to come—eternal, awesome joy in Christ. We will welcome and make our own anybody, because even the most unlikely candidate is loved passionately by the One who made us all, and if God can love, heal, and work through people like us...there is indeed hope for everyone and anyone.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.