

According to the liturgical calendar, we are still immersed in “ordinary time,” but yesterday marked the beginning of another religious season. Some people held ceremonial feasts in honor of this grand day. Some donned traditional spiritual garb. Others made pilgrimages to holy sites for a chance to set their eyes on the divine. Of course, this day is also controversial, with discussions often turning heated, occasionally pitting brother against brother and daughter against mother. I’m speaking, of course, of the triumphant return of football season.

I admit that I’m but a tepid sports enthusiast, but even passive fan like myself can get caught up in all the frenzy. How could you not? The fans sporting their team colors. The thunder of the marching band. Loud cheering. The thrill of victory. And the agony of defeat.

For these reasons, cheering a particular sports teams bonds strangers together. You could be in a foreign country, sporting your Kansas City Chiefs shirt, and a complete stranger would feel safe to approach you, shake your hand, and inquire, “How about that patrick Mahomes?” Or, if not exactly speak to you, give you that knowing glance and a nod of the head. And in that brief moment, you and that stranger have already sized each other up and found one another to be acceptable.

We’re taught not to judge people by how they look. But it’s a lesson that few of us truly master. We judge people all the time by how they dress and act, because the manner in which a person dresses can often tell us something about who they are. Depending on your point of view, a person wearing a Black Lives Matter or a Keep America Great Again t-Shirt is either friend or foe. We like to know who “belongs” our group. Because despite how much we pay lip-service to unity, humans create subgroups. Our natural inclination is to be exclusive, rather than inclusive, to whatever group we belong to, whether it be a sorority, a social organization, or even a church. As one theologian reflects, “all groups of human beings have a tendency to be exclusive; they want to know who is inside and who is out. So they adopt identity markers—visible practices of dress or vocabulary or behavior that serve to distinguish who is inside the group from who is outside.”¹

Exclusivity is not what upsets Jesus in today’s passage. Jesus and his disciples are walking through town and the Pharisees notice that some of his disciples are eating with unclean hands. It’s not that the Pharisees are overly concerned with hygiene or spreading the coronavirus—the Pharisees are more concerned that the disciples, as observant Jews, are violating an important tenet of Jewish law and custom. The Law had been set aside for the Jews in order for them to adopt a unique, exclusive identity from the other sects and cults of the day. According to the Pharisees, the disciples were acting distinctly un-Jewish which was a direct reflection on the lack of leadership of Jesus, he himself a Jewish teacher. If the teacher cannot reprimand or be a good role

¹ Ortburg, John. “Pharisees Are Us.” *The Christian Century*. August 23, 2003. Page 20.

model for his students, then what kind of teacher could he be? Certainly not a Jewish one.

Jesus, never one to back down from theological discourse [you know—for someone who preached that we ought to “turn the other cheek”, he certainly never ignores criticism], responds to the Pharisees with the kind of clever smack talk that would be perfectly in place during half-time pep talks in the locker room:

Jesus answered, "Isaiah was right about frauds like you, hit the bull's-eye in fact: These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn't in it. They act like they are worshiping me, but they don't mean it. They just use me as a cover for teaching whatever suits their fancy, Ditching God's command and taking up the latest fads."

Jesus is calling the Pharisees frauds and hypocrites. But I struggle with Jesus' criticism of observing dietary guidelines. As a Jew himself, Jesus would have known and practiced these guidelines. Why would Jesus disdain his own tradition, especially since it provided cohesion for Jews that was important for their thriving and surviving?

As one theologian reminds us, “Jesus is not criticizing Judaism per se, but rather the Pharisees, the religious authorities who are imposing rules on economically marginalized Jews who have neither the time nor the resources to follow such rules.”² Nor is Jesus criticizing Jewish rules and traditions, especially concerning food. “Jewish food practices are intended to strengthen Jewish identity and to help the community resist assimilation. Each time Jewish people eat, they are reminded that they serve the one, true, sovereign God and that their mission is to live according to God's values, so that all peoples (i.e., Jewish and Gentile communities) can live in love, peace, and justice.”³

Rather Jesus is denouncing the Pharisee's insistence of dogmatic adhering to the law. The way the Pharisees were interpreting the law created barriers for people wishing to keep Jewish practices. Jesus isn't so much upset at exclusivity, he's angry that humans have created barriers for others to participate in the worship of God. The love of God is available to all, regardless of whether or not hands are washed before a quick meal.

The church struggles with exclusivity, especially Christians, since we do not universally observe certain practices or a standard uniform. You cannot tell, generally, whether or not that woman in the produce aisle is a Presbyterian or if that gentleman at the cash register is a Roman Catholic. So what churches tend to do is create their own code of acceptable behavior, language, or traditions that might be intimidating or confusing to

² Petersen, David L.; O'Day, Gail R. (2010-11-05). Theological Bible Commentary (Kindle Locations 8928-8933). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

³ Andrews, Dale P.; Ronald J. Allen and Dawn Ottoni-W (2011-08-09). Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B (pp. 376-377). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

people who are on the outside.

For example, the words: “Eucharist.” “Narthex.” “Offertory.” “Kyrie Eleison.” “Fellowship Hall.” “Session.” “Book of Order—“ sound strange to unfamiliar ears. They sound like religious jargon. And unless we are intentional about either updating vocabulary or routinely explaining the meaning behind the movements, we maintain barriers for people to worship. We do not worship Jesus “better” just because we have a mastery of theological vocabulary. We do, however, maintain our exclusive, “country club” type atmosphere. Which is great for a country club. Not so much for a house of worship.

That’s why the communion table is always at the front of the church, regardless of whether or not it is a communion Sunday. At the Lord’s Table, all barriers are removed. At the table of Jesus Christ, there is no male or female, democrat or republican, Wildcat or Jayhawk. We don’t wear special t-shirts or uniforms to designate who we are. But when we take the bread and the juice, we participate in a ritual of eating and drinking that binds strangers together. When we greet each other in the presence of the bread and juice, then our eyes are opened as to who are the people of God.

The love of God is available to all. Will we remove the barriers we create to keep people out? Amen.

†