

Epiphany 3, January 26, 2014. Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4: 12-23
Harry Anderson.

Well now. This is interesting, isn't it? Me, standing up here. I can just see my late, beloved mother out there among you, leaning over to the woman next to her and whispering, "Who does he think he is? He's not a preacher!" No, mom, I'm not. But as you well know, I always have something to say. Our brave rector has courageously turned the pulpit over to me this morning. And, Nigel, I am especially grateful that you offered it today and not on Super Bowl Sunday next week!

What I have to say is more akin to a testimony, the kind the early Christians offered to each other when the Spirit moved them. Speaking out loud about a truth as I have come to understand it.

I have spent my life and made my living with words. And, since I became a Christian rather late in life, I've had the intriguing challenge of deciphering such exotic words as nave and narthex and catholic and eucharist, and—especially in this current season – epiphany. What I have come to understand about epiphany is that it simply means understanding a mystery. Or, perhaps more accurately, striving to understand a mystery.

The greatest mystery, of course, is Christ himself, and we are meant to spend our lives pondering that. This morning, however, I want to talk about the mystery I find in a couple words we Episcopalians toss around quite about. "Welcome" and "outcast." Both come from the Middle English. "Welcome" meaning "one whose coming is pleasant." "Outcast" meaning someone who is rejected and literally cast out of the community.

My questions this morning: What do we mean, exactly, when we say all are "welcome" here? And who is an "outcast?"

To explain my epiphany about these two words, I first need to share a bit of my personal journey of faith. All my life – and long before I became a Christian – I have seen signs that I believe came from God, and I have tried to pay attention to what those signs mean.

What I haven't been all my life is religious. My parents didn't attend church, and after I failed at being a Swedish Lutheran as a teenager, neither did I. As I came to grips with my sexual orientation as a gay man, I decided that Christianity was not for me. That stuff about abomination in Leviticus can't be swept under the rug. I refused to take the socially acceptable way around it. I just couldn't lie and fake it and deny who I am in order to find favor with a God who thought I was abominable.

As I got older, however, I felt a yearning. I was successful in my career and had a loving personal relationship with Terry, but it wasn't enough. One Sunday, a friend invited me to attend a small Episcopal church on, of all places, Hollywood Boulevard in

Los Angeles, California. Before I walked in, I noticed an old, rusty sign outside that read “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You” – exclamation point!

Being a confirmed skeptic, I could feel my suspicions rise. Where’s the fine print? The Episcopal Church Welcomes You – exclamation point! So long as what? So long as you look and act like us? So long as you are straight? So long as you agree with us politically and socially and biblically? So long as you keep quiet about things that might make us feel uncomfortable or challenge our assumptions?

Those were my honest suspicions as I entered that church back in 1996. And I’d be willing to bet they’re not much different from those of some people who pass by our church every day. Whether we recognize it or not, churches have a lot of fine print that keeps people away. What do you suppose our fine print says here at St. Augustine’s?

Despite all my doubts, Jesus tapped me on the shoulder that Sunday 18 years ago. I was baptized and confirmed within a year. And, never being one to do things half way, I have since served on the vestry and been senior warden at three Episcopal Churches – Trinity in Santa Barbara, St. Thomas in Dallas and most recently right here at St. Augustine’s.

I have found my spiritual home in the Episcopal Church. And I’m proud of how far it has come in the past four decades, on civil rights, ordaining women and publicly accepting gay and lesbian parishioners, among many other things. But I still wrestle with what the “welcome” sign means – like the one hanging outside our front door right now. If we welcome everybody, do we expect “everybody” to change and be just like us? Or, and here’s the rub, if we welcome everybody, are we willing to let “everybody” change us? Welcome. One whose coming is pleasant. But what if they’re not who we’re expecting?

I was struck by what Paul wrote in today’s reading from First Corinthians. It seems that the church in Corinth was growing. But it was attracting different kinds of Jesus followers who claimed allegiance to different disciples. And they spent a lot of time arguing. I presume, as in all church fights ever since, it was mostly over what’s correct and what’s not. As I read it, Paul is pleading with folks to forget their silly differences and welcome everybody. I’d say that advice still goes for us today.

Every week we Episcopalians gather for the Eucharist. In the prayer, we hear that Jesus yearned to draw all the world to himself, and one way he did that was by breaking bread with sinners and outcasts.

Think about that with me. Sinners, we know, are those who disobey God. All of us qualify for that label, don’t we? But who’s an outcast, and who decides? Other than the roundly detested tax collectors, who do you suppose the other “outcasts” were at those meals with Jesus?

I'd guess they were lepers and anybody else considered unclean. Widows and all unmarried women – certainly, there were no lower outcasts in the First Century. The blind, literally and figuratively. The destitute. Anybody considered not a good enough Jew. Maybe even a Greek or a Roman, on the down-low. And, unless human nature was different then, I'd guess that a few gay people were there, too. But unlike the other outcasts, they wouldn't have dared say out loud why they were outcasts. Only Jesus knew their secret.

So why did the outcasts come to dinner with Jesus? I suppose it's because he gave them permission to be themselves and to be honest. I imagine these dinners could get pretty loud and raucous. Outcasts didn't – or couldn't – conform to society's behavior norms of the day.

What else did Jesus do at these meals? He acknowledged their common humanity simply by eating with them. He listened. He didn't change the subject. Their "different-ness" didn't scare him. He offered them hope. He told them they weren't outcasts in God's eyes. This was the world's first come-as-you-are-party.

We know from John's Gospel that when the religious folk of the day saw Jesus hanging out with these outcasts, they were shocked and appalled. They called him a glutton and a drunkard for associating with the likes of "them." Aha! Now there's the proof I'm looking for.

"Outcast" is purely a human construct, isn't it? We create "outcasts" in order to feel superior to somebody else, to make them less than us. That way it's easier to dehumanize them. The outcast label allows us to put out of sight things we don't like or that make us feel uncomfortable. Outcast. Someone who is rejected and cast out of the community.

Don't get me wrong. I think we do pretty good job of welcoming the newcomer here at St. Augustine's. Certainly that was true in our case almost five years ago. We have always felt a special warmth here, and Terry and I are very grateful for that.

But if we're truly honest, can we say that we fully model Jesus's come-as-you-are party? Are we a safe place where people can be authentic and open? Do we really listen when what's said is disagreeable or strange or makes us uncomfortable? Do we expect newcomers to be like us once they join or are we open to the change they will bring to us? Does the Episcopal Church Welcome You – question mark?

Jesus told us there would be a price to pay if we follow him. Discipleship isn't easy. But he didn't say exactly how our lives would change if we follow him. In last week's Gospel reading, two of John's disciples asked Jesus where he was staying.

Remember what he told them? “Come and see.” That’s what I did that, and my life has changed. Did he make me straight? No. But he did make me better.

Most gay people grow up feeling like outcasts. We don’t experience the romantic joys and disappointments of the teen years the way our peers do. Too often we can’t share what we’re feeling with anyone. Not our parents, not our friends, not our church. It’s easier and safer to just stay quiet. Even though things are better today than when I grew up, there still are many gay people – young and not so young – who struggle with this. They really need an invitation to Jesus’s come-as-you-are party.

But this isn’t just about gay people. In one way or another, every one of us is an outcast. Something about each of us makes somebody else disappointed, angry, embarrassed, uncomfortable or anxious, and they have cast us out. That’s why we all need an invitation to the party.

While Terry and I were living in Dallas in 2008, I met Gene Robinson, the Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire. As many of you know, his election as a bishop, as an openly gay man, set off a shock wave across the Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican Communion. Some quit the church. Parishes split apart, including St. Stephen’s in Oak Harbor. A few Episcopal bishops and a number of priests resigned. The Archbishop of Canterbury disinvited Gene from the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Communion Bishops because of the worldwide uproar.

The day in 2003 that he was installed as Bishop, Gene received death threats. He wore a bulletproof vest under his vestments, and Mark, his partner of more than 20 years, went into hiding.

Gene visited our little parish in Dallas in 2008 as a favor to our rector, with whom he had attended seminary. The very conservative bishop of the Diocese of Dallas had forbidden Gene to vest or preside at the Eucharist while he was in town.

But our small, maverick of a parish was thrilled to have him among us. As senior warden, I got to introduce Gene at coffee hour. It was a joyous moment.

He gave me a warm hug. And as he did, I felt something like metal buckles down his back, and it dawned on me. Gene was still wearing a bulletproof vest under his purple bishop’s shirt. The Episcopal Church Welcomes You – question mark?

I’ll share a few of the words Gene spoke that morning:

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says this really astounding thing. “There is much that I would teach you. But you cannot bear it right now. So I will send the Holy Spirit who will lead you into all truth.” I take that to mean this: Don’t think for a minute – you bunch of thick-headed, uneducated fisherman I chose as my disciples – that God is

done with you and those who come after you. Does anyone doubt that we were led by the Holy Spirit to turn our backs on defending slavery using Scripture? Is it not the Holy Spirit that is leading us to a fuller understanding of the gifts, integrities and experiences of women? And I would say that the Holy Spirit is leading us to recognize gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. We should see this as a sign of a living God. He didn't retire someplace in the Bahamas at the end of the first century. He has never stopped revealing himself.

God bless you, Gene Robinson, and amen. And may the Holy Spirit continue to lead us into all truth here at St. Augustine's.