

“WHO’S IN/WHO’S OUT?”
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28
A Sermon by John Thomason
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When sports leagues approach the end of their regular seasons, players and fans alike are obsessed with the question, “Who’s in and who’s out?” That is, who will qualify for the playoffs and keep their championship hopes alive, and who will fail to make the postseason and have to go home early?

Of course, it’s not just in the world of sports that we distinguish between who’s in and who’s out. When I was a sophomore in college, I decided I wanted to join a fraternity. The group I had my sights set on was not one of the national Greek organizations; it was a service club unique to my university. The club was highly regarded because it took the lead in so many student activities and because it was comprised of “big men on campus” – you know, upperclassmen who had charismatic personalities and strong leadership skills. I wanted to be identified with them – to be accepted, affirmed, and included by a group of peers I deeply admired. I wanted some of their prestige and prowess to rub off on me.

So, I went through what fraternities and sororities call “rush,” which amounted to a couple of get-acquainted social events where I tried to make the best possible impression on the club members. Then the fateful night came when the big question got answered: “Who’s in and who’s out?” I and the other pledge candidates were instructed to be in our dorm rooms at a certain time and await a knock at the door from a club member informing us that that we were among the chosen ones. Well, the knock came to my door confirming that I was in, and I couldn’t have been more proud and excited.

At the time, I gave little thought to the fact that some young men didn’t get a knock on their doors and were left out of the pledge class. I never considered how they might have felt devalued and snubbed. But I did give this a lot more thought during the next pledging period. My roommate went through rush with this same club. He was a personable, caring, conscientious young man; but, for whatever reason, he didn’t make the cut. So there we were, companions and confidantes who shared the same living space, often ate meals together, attended church services and football games together, but we would not be fraternity brothers together. I was in and he was out. It was awkward and painful for both of us.

I began to realize that there are many organizations out there that do not say, “whosoever will, may come.” They preselect their members; so by definition, they are not open to all persons. Sometimes they pick and choose for legitimate reasons, on the basis of ability or merit. Major League Baseball has every right to employ players who have major league skills and to reject those who don’t. A business has every right to hire the most qualified people, which means saying “no” to job candidates who are less qualified. But sometimes in organizational life, who’s in and who’s out is determined by factors that are highly questionable – like gender, or ethnicity, or financial status, or physical appearance. Not too many years ago, a lot of civic clubs, social clubs, and sports clubs were exclusive by nature – which often meant that their membership consisted solely of

affluent white males. For some of these men, part of the point of belonging was to be in an “in group” to which only certain people can belong. “I’m in and you’re out.”

When I was a college student, I observed this pattern in my fraternity and began to recognize it in other organizations as well. And it was then that I began asking a potentially dangerous and embarrassing question: Are there ways in which the Body of Christ is exclusive? Who’s in and who’s out in the Church?

It’s instructive that this question is written all over today’s Gospel and Epistle lessons. In the reading from Matthew, Jesus ventures out of Israel into the neighboring region of Tyre and Sidon. There he encounters a Canaanite woman who begs him to come heal her daughter, who is demon-possessed. There are several remarkable features to this story. When Matthew identifies the woman as a “Canaanite,” he is telling us that she is a foreigner to Jesus and his disciples. She is a Gentile, one who stands outside God’s covenant with Israel. No doubt she “knows her place” – as a Canaanite, and also as a woman. But, amazingly enough, she has the courage – or the audacity – to approach Jesus and ask for his help. What’s more, when she does approach Jesus, she addresses him as “Lord, Son of David” – a title reserved for the Jewish Messiah (Matthew 15:22). She – a non-Jew! -- is the first person in Matthew’s Gospel to recognize and affirm who Jesus is. Go figure – a Canaanite woman confesses faith in Jesus as the Messiah even before the disciples do!

However, the most remarkable feature of this story is Jesus’ response to the woman. At first, he basically ignores her. It is the disciples who call Jesus’ attention to the woman because they are annoyed by her persistent shouting. When they implore Jesus to send her away, Jesus seems to acquiesce. He doesn’t dismiss her because of her noisy clamoring; he simply observes that she is not Jewish and therefore is not on his immediate radar. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” he says (15:24). When the woman pleads her case further at Jesus’ feet, he replies that meeting her need would be like feeding the dogs when there are hungry children to be fed. This is a rather crude way of saying that he must give priority to his own people in his kingdom mission, and others will just have to wait their turn. Well, the woman insists that the dogs have to eat, too; people outside Israel also need his ministry. It is only then that Jesus recognizes her genuine faith and agrees to heal her daughter.

Do you see what a strange story this is? And do you hear the question that the story is struggling with? “Who’s in and who’s out?” The first answer Jesus gives doesn’t sound like the Jesus most of us know and love: Jews are in; Gentiles are out. Jews are God’s beloved children; Gentiles are the scroungy family pets. The second answer Jesus gives seems more characteristic of him and his overall message: anyone who has faith in him is admitted to the kingdom. At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the risen Jesus sets the record straight once and for all: he commands his disciples to preach the gospel to “all nations” (28:19). That’s about as inclusive as it gets.

But in the meantime, what’s going on here in Tyre and Sidon, in Jesus’ harsh response to the Canaanite woman, which is then followed – almost as a footnote – by a compassionate response? Is Jesus merely testing the woman’s faith? Is Jesus’ sense of his own mission evolving and enlarging? Is Jesus just having a bad day? We simply don’t know. What we do know is that this evangelist, Matthew, understands Jesus’ mission during his lifetime to be confined to Israel. God intends to save the whole world, but Jews are to be the instruments of this salvation. Therefore, Matthew’s Jesus puts first things first; he concentrates his attention on the house of

Israel, trusting that other houses will eventually hear the gospel message and become a part of God's great neighborhood.

But again, this is Jesus' stance during his earthly ministry, before his resurrection. After the resurrection, everything changes. Matthew himself acknowledges this change by concluding his Gospel with the risen Jesus issuing his Great Commission, to take the good news of salvation to everyone.

A few decades later, it is the apostle Paul who reflects this change most dramatically. Paul resides and preaches in Gentile territory, but out of loyalty and concern for his own people he takes the gospel message first to Jewish synagogues. However, by the time he writes his Epistle to the Romans, it has become clear that most Jews reject Jesus as the Messiah. So Paul shifts his energy and takes the message of salvation in Christ to the Gentiles, who are amazingly receptive. Soon, Gentile converts to Christianity outnumber Jewish converts. So the question is being raised again: "Who's in and who's out?" But by this point the tables have completely turned: some are suggesting that Gentiles are in and Jews are out!

This is the issue Paul is addressing here in the 11th chapter of Romans. He states it as a blunt rhetorical question: "Has God rejected his people?" (Romans 11:1) – referring, of course, to the Jews. Because Israel refuses to accept God's new covenant in Christ, does God now refuse to accept Israel? Apparently, some in the Roman church are saying "Yes" – as many other Christians have said in succeeding times and places. But Paul says an emphatic "No." "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew" (v. 2a).

At first glance, one wonders how Paul reaches this conclusion. In this same chapter, he refers in no uncertain terms to Israel's "disobedience" (v. 30). He clearly grieves their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. He acknowledges that from a human point of view the case against Israel is airtight and undeniable. But over against all this, Paul makes one of the most extravagant claims in all of Scripture: "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (v. 29). Paul could not choose a stronger word than this one. When a decision or action is "irrevocable," it cannot be changed or reversed; it is final. In this instance, what God has done for Israel is a "done deal." Israel is not suddenly out; Israel is permanently in!

Notice: Paul makes this claim with no guarantee that Israel will come to accept God's new covenant in Christ, although he certainly hopes they will. But here he is not focused on the beliefs or behaviors of Israel; rather, he is focused on the grace and faithfulness of God. What is at stake here is God's integrity: does God say what God means, and does God mean what God says? Is God consistent and uncompromising in God's principles and actions? Can God be trusted to keep God's promises? If God says certain people are in, are they in for the duration of the journey, or do they run the risk of being cast out if they falter?

And here is where this passage comes alive and takes on a sense of urgency for us. This is not just a boring 2000-year old argument about the spiritual destiny of Jews. It is also about our destiny as Christians, about our standing before God, in this life and the next. For we, too, wander off in unbelief and disobedience. We, too, worry about "who's in and who's out," especially when the "who" we are worried about is ourselves. You and I want to know: when we are unfaithful to God, does God remain faithful to us? For me at least, there are no words more reassuring in all the Bible than Paul's promise to the Romans: "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable."

In fact, I have a personal testimony about the truth and power of that verse of Scripture. Many of you know that I am a one-career minister. Unlike many younger clergy today, I did not have a prior career as an engineer, an accountant, or whatever. I went directly from college to seminary and graduate school, and then immediately into the ordained ministry. But it would be more accurate to say that I've had four careers as a minister, because the first three of them came to an end, due in part to my own personal struggles and failures, leaving me each time in a state of uncertainty.

Career Number One: I started out by pastoring for 12 years in Southern Baptist churches. When I went through a divorce in 1989, I soon realized that my career as a Baptist was over.

Career Number Two: I spent four fulfilling years in hospital chaplaincy, but I had no denominational home during that period and still yearned to pastor a local church again.

Career Number Three: In 1993, I was graciously received by the United Methodist Church and began serving congregations in my home state of Texas. But, to be honest with you, I always felt like something of an outsider as a Texas Methodist. My accent was right, but my pedigree was wrong. I was viewed with suspicion by some Methodist clergy because I was a former Southern Baptist ("You know how they are!"). I didn't have the long-standing connections most of my Methodist colleagues had. I never felt that I fully belonged.

Which brought me to Career Number Four: when both of my daughters moved to New York City, I seized the opportunity to seek out a place of service in the New York Annual Conference. By the time I moved to New York State in 2007, I was well-established as a Methodist. But this time, my pedigree was right, and my accent was wrong! A few of my fellow clergy typecast me as an old-school Southerner, even though I assured them I had a Northeastern soul. Once again, I started all over again in brand new territory, feeling like a solitary Canaanite in a large company of Jews, or a solitary Jew in a large company of Christians. I can tell you from personal experience that there is nothing so painful as asking, "Who's in and who's out?", and feeling like you are the one who is out.

I look back on 44 years of pastoral ministry in 6 different states and sometimes marvel that I ever made it this far. There were many occasions when I had every reason to doubt myself and my calling, to give up on ordained ministry and find something else to do with my life.

Well, I'll tell you how I made it this far. Through every difficult transition, I was sustained by the unconditional love of my family. In each new place, I was supported by fellow ministers and by laypersons like yourselves who offered "open hearts, open minds, and open doors." And above all, I was encouraged by Paul's promise to the Romans: "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." In those times when I felt finished as a minister, I discovered that God wasn't finished with my ministry.

Friends, those whom God chooses – and that includes you – God does not cast off. When you and I are unfaithful, or when others are unfaithful to us, God remains faithful. In God's sight, all of us are in, and we always will be.