

The Holy Spirit

I'm doing a wedding next month in Vermont for the daughter of a seminary classmate of mine. Nothing unusual about that. I do weddings all the time, of course, most of them here in Philadelphia, but from time to time elsewhere as well. In fact, I counted it up this past week, and since coming here, I've done weddings in Delaware, New Jersey, Tennessee, Alabama, Florida, California, the District of Columbia, and Maine. And generally speaking, with my being an ordained minister, there's nothing special I have to do in order to officiate at weddings out of state, though once in a while there's a form to be filled out, along with a small fee to be paid for the privilege.

But not Vermont. You would not believe what we had to go through for me to get permission to officiate at this wedding. Not only did I have to provide the probate court clerk of Addison County with proof of my ecclesiastical credentials, including the date of my ordination (which I had to look up), I also had to provide information as to my educational credentials, just exactly where and when I had attended both college and divinity school. Finally, the young couple getting married had to explain why they needed to import me for their wedding instead of using one of the no doubt many fine clergy resident in the state of Vermont.

I have no idea why all this was required. But I could hardly believe that even in the state that boasts Bernie Sanders as one of its senators, they were all that concerned with protecting the employment of local clergy. So I figured there had to be some other reason for such requirements, particularly at a time when most places almost anyone can get permission to officiate at weddings. Even Craig Boddorff has officiated at a wedding. So why is it so difficult in Vermont of all places, or at least so bureaucratic?

I still don't know why for sure, but a little bit of research seems to indicate that it's a long-standing tradition, something that goes back a long way, maybe even as far back as the early days of Vermont's history. You see, back then, Vermont was far from the chic-chic place that it is today. In fact, it was the frontier in those days and settled mostly by folks who had been squeezed out of other parts of New England, including a disproportionate number of people who belonged to religious groups that were in those days only border-line reputable, among them Baptists and Universalists. Which may well have been the original basis of those restrictive regulations, an attempt to impose some control over the performing of ordinances that had civil status (i.e., marriages) among religious groups that had little or no limitations upon ordination. Hence, the relevance of where I went to school and by whom I had been ordained.

I mention that this morning, because if we can think back to a time when there were such concerns even here in the US, it might give us a little flavor for what life was like in the early church, and perhaps a better understanding of why the early Christians so often had such a hard

time of it. Because it wasn't necessarily a reaction to *what* they were preaching, as much as it was to *who* was preaching, that being people who didn't ordinarily have the standing to speak in public, or in the presence of their social superiors. You see, one of the things that's very hard for us to imagine these days is just how status conscious ancient societies were, just how much one's standing in society determined one's place in the world. And how dangerous it could be, then, to mess around with those kinds of rules, because to do so was in the eyes of many quite literally to turn the world upside down.

That, of course, is one of the reasons why the prophets in the Bible—almost all of whom came from the boondocks—encountered such flack for their preaching in ancient Israel. It wasn't just because of what they said. It was every bit as much because of who they were, or even more who they weren't. Our Old Testament lesson this morning from Numbers is a good example of this. When two men who weren't considered elders of the people began prophesying among the people, and doing so not in the place reserved for religious speech, some of the elders complained. Even Joshua, Moses' right hand man, demanded that he stop them. Which Moses refused to do, responding "Would that all of God's people were prophets!" a far more radical social and political statement than you can probably imagine. I mean, "*all of God's people prophets?*"

We see something of the same spirit in Peter's speech on the Day of Pentecost when he quotes the prophet Joel about the upheavals that will take place on the day of the Lord, because on that day—the prophet declared—the Lord would pour out his spirit on *all* flesh. Even—he says—on the slaves! On that day, even *slaves* would prophesy. And once the slaves started prophesying, how long do you think they were going to be content to be slaves, a not inconsiderable concern in a society where a large percentage of the people were precisely that, slaves. That sort of talk was playing with fire.

Which, again, is one of the reasons Paul had such difficulty with the Christians in Corinth. It wasn't just that in the church Jews and Gentiles had equal status. That was tough enough, but what was more, Paul insisted that in Christ both slaves and free were of equal status, and that to many people in those days, no doubt including many of the Christians in Corinth, was an astonishing claim, a claim whose full implications are still shocking to many even today. Yet for Paul, that was what the Holy Spirit was all about, molding people of all levels of social standing into one body in which no one member was considered superior to any other, any more than the hand can say to the foot, "I'm more important than you."

Even now, two thousand years later, such social divisions persist not only in society at large, but even within the body of Christ, the church. While differences in doctrine, i.e., differences in what we claim to believe, tend to get all the attention, it is, I suspect, the differences in social standing that are the most enduring and most difficult barriers to overcome. Sadly, sometimes our efforts to heal long standing doctrinal divisions within the church have only exacerbated these even more deep seated social divisions.

I ran across a good example of this in a book I've been reading about the changes over the years in the religious character of American colleges and universities. Seems that in the

nineteenth century, there was a strong movement in both public and private colleges toward a non-sectarian religious identity, as opposed to a rigidly denominational identity. On the surface, this seemed to represent a much more ecumenical spirit, an attempt to overcome those divisions that are still so persistent among various denominations. In practice, however, and as became more and more clear over time, what it really demonstrated is that theological divisions among various Protestant denominations were not nearly so strong as the social divisions even within those same denominations, a social stratification that is still perniciously evident even today in all too many schools. Today, though, the magic word is no longer non-sectarian. These days we speak more often of being inclusive or promoting diversity, but just as in the earlier version, this effort very often furthers a process of stratification in our society along both social and economic lines.

We're no strangers to that process. In fact, in many ways, we're quite literally the fruit of that process. When we got the results of the survey we did last fall for our Mission Study, the one statistic that really jumped off the page at me was the high percentage of persons filling out the form who reported being college graduates. Anyone remember what that percentage was? It was 93%. My first reaction upon hearing that was to think, "Wow. Aren't we smart!" Upon reflection, though, my second reaction was "What's wrong with us?" Now, my hopefully more measured response is "What can we do about this?" What can we do to make this a truly inclusive church, a church where the spirit really does fall upon all flesh, upon both Jews and Gentiles, upon both slave and free, both rich and poor, both straight and gay, both college graduates and people with little or no formal education at all. Everyone.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*