

CRIBB<S>NOTE-FEBRUARY 15, 2009

What is the difference between an 'audience' and a 'congregation'? As we reflect on Jesus' ministry and the people who were attracted to him, it is helpful to think about the qualitative difference between those two gatherings.

When we come to church we gather as a congregation. While we may have some of the characteristics of an 'audience', we actually assemble to do more than merely listen. We are encouraged to be engaged in a full process of revering God and affirming life.

On the other hand, an audience comes together to watch, listen, and experience an event. As 'spectators,' there is no expectation to get involved in the activities taking place in front of them. They basically watch and wait, but do not participate.

Many of the people who came to Jesus did not follow him. They left their homes and sought him wherever he was to get a glimpse of the man who created a stir; but when they discovered he was not a 'showman' or 'miracle worker', they turned away and went back to doing whatever they had been doing.

It would be a tragedy or even a travesty if, as a congregation, we left the sanctuary untouched, unmoved, uncommitted, or unchanged. The very act of accepting the discipleship of Christ means opening ourselves to receive the Holy Spirit.

Of course, the invitation to discipleship is extended to everyone, but for some the cost is too high.

The Good News comes as a fulfillment of God's promise to receive and accept us just as we are without exception. Everyone is accepted. Nobody is rejected.

When the leper approached Jesus and begged to be healed of his skin disease, Jesus embraced him. The stranger was a sick person who had been forced to the margins of his community because he was viewed as dirty, unclean, unhealthy, and diseased. No doubt, he wanted to be faithful and observe all the rituals of worship, but his physical condition disqualified him from being an active member of society. He was pushed to the edge of life.

Jesus showed compassion, "stretched out his hand and touched him." There is nothing short of remarkable about how by refusing to follow tradition, Jesus placed himself inside the life of a person who knew rejection. Jesus made it possible for the leper to become part of the congregation.

Although Jesus sternly told the leper not to tell anyone about how he was healed, the rearrangement of his circumstance compelled the man to shout loudly and he told everybody about Jesus. He no longer was the spectacle in a hostile environment. The former leper joined the congregation of believers and proclaimed a message of hope.

We are called to be a compassionate community that welcomes everyone into our midst. Further, we are called to leave the sanctuary and enter the streets as activists and advocates of the Gospel and social justice based on our faith in Jesus Christ. We are not here simply as an audience. We are a congregation gathered with the purpose of being the Body of Christ.