

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable to you oh God creator, redeemer, and sustainer. [Make sign of the cross]. Amen.

Please be seated.

Last Sunday I was *officially* received into the Episcopal Church.

This decision has been a long time coming.

I, like many of you, was born and raised in the Roman Catholic Church. For about five years I was straddling the border line between the Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church – often going to both an Episcopal Church and a Roman Catholic Church on any given Sunday.

But for about three years, I have been committed to the Episcopal church -- splitting my time between worshipping here at St. Thomas's and at Christ and Holy Trinity in Westport, where my fiancée serves as the Associate Rector.

So in many ways being received into the Episcopal Church was a sacred moment that reaffirmed a decision that I have been making in my heart for the past eight years.

When I came downstairs the morning of my reception, my partner had already left to preach the 8AM service. On the kitchen counter, she had left a note on an index card for me. [Hold up note]

The end of the note said, "Welcome to ambiguity land. God is here."

[Pause]

It is a powerful and interesting choice of words, isn't it? *Ambiguity land*.

It almost sounds like a roller coaster ride at Six Flags.

Take a look around. Is the Episcopal Church ambiguity land??

It seems to me that my partner wrote those words because she knew at a deep level that leaving the Roman Catholic Church, and formally entering the Episcopal Church, was *for me* leaving a land of certainty, a land I know well. And it was also leaving a way of *being* – in fact, the *only* way of being that I had known for most of my life.

Formally being received into the Episcopal church was (in many ways) entering ambiguity land.

But to say that I have officially entered into the Episcopal Church, into *ambiguity land* – is *not* to say that I have entered a land of apprehension, of doubt, or of suspicion.

I know that when many people come to the Episcopal Church – they finally feel as though they have reached a safe, holy, reaffirming space.

And it is all of those things.

But so too is it ambiguous.

Ambiguity, as defined in the dictionary, is the quality of being open to more than one interpretation.

If this is true, then Episcopal Church really is ambiguity land.

In an interview given a few years ago, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said, “We are a tradition that has historically been able to live with differences. I think now we are seeking to live that out in some new ways...to be a church that embraces diverse theological traditions and also diverse groups of people... that is the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Way.”

The Episcopal Church undoubtedly has a beautiful ability to embrace diversity and entertain the unknown. Being able to hold the tension between Roman Catholicism and other forms of Protestantism – ambiguity is the name of the game for the Episcopal Church.

Our communal journey through ambiguity land is not simply – as the dictionary names-- being open to more than one interpretation. Although that is apart of it. But ambiguity, for us, is the quality of being open to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

It is a decision to remain open to how God is continuing to manifest Godself in the world today. To be attuned to where and how God is still speaking. And to be open and willing to follow the Holy Spirit – even and *especially* when the Spirit is taking us into uncharted territory.

But doing that is terrifying. Existing in *ambiguity land* is not easy.

Perhaps this is why Christ says in our Gospel today that it is *sinful* to go against the Holy Spirit.

“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

This is incredibly strong language – even for the polemical and often antagonistic Christ that we find portrayed in the Gospel of Mark.

So let us contextualize this a little bit.

Although scholars are uncertain about *who* exactly was the author of Mark, it seems to have been composed from the perspective of those who were marginalized by the dominant political powers. It was probably written just after the Roman-Judean War --- when the Romans conquered Jerusalem, and destroyed the Temple.

And so the Gospel of Mark notoriously pushes the virtue of courage ---
And vehemently encourages us to resist living and acting by fear.

It's no wonder that Christ says in this passage that going against the Holy Spirit is a sin. Because daring to follow the Holy Spirit is the ultimate sign of courage – and resisting the movement of the Holy Spirit in our own lives means that we are allowing ourselves to be governed by fear.

Whatever the Holy Spirit is – whatever theological categories or names we give the third 'person' of the Divine Trinity – one thing is clear, The Holy Spirit does not guide us toward anything that is static, or ossified. But invites us to something dynamic and transformative.

You know, I never quite understood why the Holy Spirit was often evoked as *The Comforter*- when I have only ever experience the Holy Spirit to be a destabilizing force.

I know there are a lot of theologians in the pews this morning – many my former professors at Yale – so at the risk of inadequately capturing the third person of the Trinity – I'll go ahead and claim that, as I understand it, the Holy Spirit always seems to be doing three things.

- (1) Leading us into ambiguity, into the unknown
- (2) Deepening our sense of self in light of God
- (3) Expanding / widening our circle of kinship

The Holy Spirit is how God shows up in the world calling us to a new sense of being and a new sense of community.

For Jesus to say that going against the Holy Spirit is the ultimate sin is not some condemnation about morality.

We can understand sin here, as theological ethicist Jim Keenan does, as the *failure to bother to love....*

Going against the Holy Spirit is the ultimate act that keeps us from more deeply loving God and loving others.

And so going against the Holy Spirit *is* sinful. It keeps us from the Divine. It keeps us from one another. It keeps us from ourselves. When we don't follow the Holy Spirit we are kept by fear in isolation....we remain in the confines of our own established boundaries. When we don't follow the Holy Spirit we build walls instead of tearing them down.

And I get it. The call to follow the Holy Spirit is scary!

It is *terrifying* to leave behind old ways of thinking and former ways of being – because certainty is where we feel safe.

But that is not where God is.

The Holy Spirit is the radical voice compelling us to leave our comfort zones. Reminding us that the second we think we have defined God ultimately and absolutely, we have in actuality lost the very essence of the Divine.

Theologian Sondra Schneider has a terrific insight about this, when she reminds us that The Trinity is not two men and a bird. The Holy Spirit is not the amorphous feminine third to the two clear masculine images of the Divine in the Trinity.

The Holy Spirit is the mystery of God that is closer to us than we are to ourselves. It is God drawing near and passing by with life-giving and liberating power.

In the late second century, the theologian Tertullian used a wealth of images to explain Holy Spirit. If God can be likened to the sun, he said, then Christ is the sunbeam coming to earth, and the Spirit is the suntan, the spot of warmth where the sun arrives and has an effect. Similarly, he said that the first person of the Trinity can be likened to an upwelling spring of water, the second person to the river flowing from it, and the third person to the irrigation ditch where the water reaches plants and makes them grow.

These are all metaphors for the God beyond us, who as God comes forth in the flesh to be with us in history, and as God again actually has an effect within the world.

And both metaphors demonstrate how the Spirit is calling us to new ways of being, transforming us anew in the light of the Divine.

When we are following the Holy Spirit we are opening ourselves up to the possibility of being transformed. The Spirit refers to God present and active in the world – endlessly:

- (1) Leading us into ambiguity
- (2) Deepening our sense of self in light of God
- (3) Expanding our circle of kinship

And I want to conclude on this third point. That the Holy Spirit is expanding and widening our circle of kinship.

In our Gospel passage for today, Mark writes that Jesus' mother and brothers were standing outside and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

It is easy to get tripped up by this point in the text

But this is not about Jesus rejecting his biological family.

It is a lesson that following the Holy Spirit *demands that we widen our circle of who we consider to be a part of our family.*

The Holy Spirit is always calling for us to expand our sphere of kinship.

And that will always lead us into an ambiguous space.

When we widen our circle of kinship --- we have to expect the unexpected. We must be willing to enter into the chaos of others.

This is ambiguity land. Where all things are being made new.

And our call to follow the Holy Spirit and widen our circle of kinship comes in many forms.

It came for me last Sunday morning by formally being received into the Episcopal Church.

My circle of kinship was widened. I entered the ambiguous land. God was there.

It comes in the form of inviting someone, perhaps for the first time, to attend a LGBTQ Pride event. Reaching out a hand to someone who says, "This all makes me a little uncomfortable...but I want to understand."

The circle of kinship is widened. We enter into the ambiguous land. God is there.

It comes in the form of a men who deconstruct the patriarchal mindset inculcated in their being. Who vehemently stand up to other men whose language and actions perpetuate gendered based violence.

The circle of kinship is widened to all of God's creation. We enter into the ambiguous land. God is there.

It comes at any moment when we prophetically reclaim Jesus. When we envision the solidarity that awaits us in the coming of the Kingdom and enact that vision of solidarity boldly in our daily lives.

Here is the important part to all of this.

When we dare to follow the Holy Spirit... when we entertain the ambiguity of our lives... when we expand our circle of kinship... our very being is irreversibly transformed.

I would imagine at the end of the day.... This is why we shy away from following the Holy Spirit.

Close your eyes for a second.

Image you are a small child, standing before a door to a secret room.

Perhaps you get the courage to raise your hand and place it on the knob only to pull away in fear.

Transfixed with wonder, drawn by some compelling Spirit, you put hand on the knob again.

You don't know what is behind the door. All you know is that if you open it, and enter, you will never be the same again.

Because it's likely that you'll befriend people who are different than you. People who society deems as unworthy.

You'll be challenged by the Gospel and grow tired from the demands of justice.

You'll experience love beyond your wildest imagination. It will make you vulnerable and break you open to the beauty this world has to offer.

The powers and principalities that once afforded you great privilege will disappear.

You will have a sense of who the Divine is and then it will slip through your fingers like fine grains of sand.

Go on, open the door.

Welcome to *ambiguity land*. God is here.