The lessons from today’s Hebrew and Gospel readings tell an old, old story. It is the story of how the people of God always have been – and still are today – desperate to know God. We are desperate to know God because we are designed to be in relationship with God. It is a story that we’ll look at today through lens of the Hebrew Children. A story that we see repeated with the disciples of Jesus. And it is a story that we are still living today. We are a people designed by God who are desperate to be in relationship with God.

In today’s lesson from the Hebrew Scripture, we find that the people are restless. They’ve been restless since the time they left Egypt. Think back to the time when God called Moses up onto the Mountain to receive the Law. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. And the people grew restless. They began to think that their leader had abandoned them.

They were outside the familiar land of Egypt. They were afraid and they were confused – and so they built an idol. They took all of their wealth. They took everything that made them feel safe. And Aaron made a golden calf that the people worshiped.

For many of us, our desire to be in relationship with God can become so desperate that we create idols. Things that we worship instead of God. Things to which we cling, when we are afraid and confused.

And so in today’s readings we encounter this restless people again. These restless people from whom we have so much to learn. They’ve just been given manna from heaven. A miracle falls from heaven every day for five days, and then a double blessing on the 6th day. And now, they whine about the lack of fresh vegetables and fish! Moses hears this complaining, and he begins to whine, to God! After listening to Moses vent, God finally tells Moses to get together seventy of the leaders of the tribes and bring them out of the camp and up to the Tent. Once they get to the Tent, God comes down and takes some of the spirit from Moses. God gives some of that spirit to the 70 leaders who accompany Moses to the Tent.

The word used in the text for spirit could also be translated as leadership and
responsibility. God took some of the leadership and responsibility that Moses held as a gift from God, and gave some of that same gift to the 70 new leaders.

Meanwhile – back at the Camp – God also gives some of the spirit to two new leaders. Leaders that the people had not expected. In fact, this was so unexpected that Joshua said to Moses “Make them stop!” I think that it is safe to assume that Joshua would have been one of the 70 guys who had been at the Tent. And now – he and others see something that they hadn’t expected. They see that God’s gift of leadership and responsibility has been given to two fellows named Eldad and Medad.

Joshua said to Moses “Make them stop.” Moses said – “Are you kidding? God has given them the Spirit. Good for them!” Joshua had tried to draw a circle. A circle around Moses that included Joshua and the other people that he understood were to be the leaders. A circle that did not include Eldad and Medad.

For what was Joshua desperate? Was he desperate for a relationship with God? Or was he desperately trying to be in control? What do you think? Was God limited by the circle that Joshua had drawn? Was God only inside that circle? Or was God also outside the circle? Outside with Eldad and Medad?

Today’s gospel opens with what seems like a rerun of the story that we just left with Joshua. The disciple John says “Jesus – we saw someone casting out demons in your name – and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” Do you catch that? Listen to the last pronoun. Someone is casting out demons in Jesus’ name – and John is upset “because he is not following US.” It’s not that John is mad because the exorcist isn’t following Jesus – it’s because the exorcist is not following the disciples. Like Moses before him, Jesus says “Are you kidding? Leave that guy alone. Good for him.”

What’s up with John? Like Joshua, for what was John desperate? Was he desperate to be in relationship with Jesus? Or was he desperate to be in control? In just last week’s Gospel reading, remember that the disciples had been arguing about which one of them was the greatest. It sounds to me that John – like Joshua before him – was more jealous than anything else. John had drawn a circle. A circle around Jesus that included John and the other people that he understood were to be the leaders.
What do you think? Was God constrained and held within the circle that John had drawn – or was God also outside the circle?

I said at the beginning that this is an old, old story. And it is a story that we are still living today. Only today it isn’t the Hebrew Children at the Exodus. And today it isn’t John and the other disciples. Today it is within the church in America that we continue to live through this old, old, tired story in our history. Within the last 40 years the church once again faced an opportunity to either live out this same tired old story – one more time – or, try to break the cycle. In 1963, The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested in Birmingham, Alabama, while he was trying to lead our country into the reality of liberty and justice for all that seemed like a distant dream at the time. I know that members of this parish – perhaps some sitting in the pews today – went to the South to join in the struggle for that dream.

While in jail, King communicated with leaders in the white, mainstream churches including the Episcopal Church. Those leaders – including some of our bishops – told The Rev. Dr. King that he wasn’t welcome inside their circle just yet. They told him that his cause perhaps, just might have some merit – but this just wasn’t the time. King was told that he needed to just give it up for now.

For what was the white church desperate? Were they desperate for a relationship with God? Or where they desperate to maintain their control? The leaders of the white, mainstream churches drew a circle around themselves, around their churches, around their power and position. And they told Martin Luther King and black America, that they were not welcome inside.

What do you think? Was God constrained and held within the circle drawn by the white church? Or was God perhaps also sitting with King in that jail cell in Birmingham?

Our church continues to live into this old, old story of drawing a circle – of deciding who is inside with us, and who is outside. There was another circle. A circle that was drawn with care and devotion. It was a circle constructed with the finest understanding of scripture, tradition and reason that almost 2,000 years of experience could provide. The circle said that women were welcome in church, so long as they sat quietly in the pews. Women were not welcome in the church as
clergy. Can woman only have a relationship with God when they set in the pews, sing in the choir, serve on the Altar Guild? Or was the Spirit of God present in Philadelphia in 1974 – when those eleven women stood before those three bishops?

For what was the church desperate? Where they desperate to be in a relationship with God? Or were they desperate to cling onto their tired, old belief in the myth that only men can lead the church?

What do you think? Was God constrained and held within that circle constructed from the best of scripture, tradition and reason? Or was God in Philadelphia that day when those women and those bishops stepped across that line and changed the church forever?


Before we get to the last circle – and the last question – look in The Hymnal again at the sequence hymn that we just sang, number 603. We pick up a great deal of our theology – for both good and ill – from hymns. It’s often subtle – and I admit that sometimes I get a little lost in enjoying the tune and the sound of my own voice.

But the first time I sang these words, it was like I took a sucker-punch to the gut.

*Where generation, class, or race divide us to our shame, he sees not labels, but a face, a person, and a name. Thus freely loved, though fully known may I in Christ be free to welcome and accept his own, as Christ accepted me.*

We cannot be *more fully known*, than we are known by God. We cannot be *more freely loved*, than we are loved by God.

So, are we ready to look at that next circle? To consider the next question?
Since the General Convention of our church in 2003, and still continuing in the months since our 2006 national meeting, the attention of many people has been focused on yet another circle that the church has drawn. This circle speaks to the circumstances under which our brothers and sisters who are gay or lesbian are welcome in the leadership of the church. It is a circle that is also well-drawn and well-constructed – using materials that come from our experience in understanding the scriptures and our traditions. It is a circle that is looked upon and viewed by many faithful people as being foundational to their faith. But it is a circle that others of us experience as a place of separation and exclusion.

As has always been the case when we draw circles that attempt to circumscribe and keep within due bounds the movement of the Spirit of God – that the church stands at risk. We stand at risk of turning our traditions into an idol. We stand at risk of being firmly, securely and – we think, safely – within our circle. The church might be standing inside a circle based on scripture, tradition and reason – when the Spirit of God is busy is moving outside the circle.

The Spirit of God who moved – with Eldad and Medad – and not just with Joshua. The Spirit of God who moved with the exorcist working in the name of Jesus, and not only with John. The Spirit of God who moved with those of you, who risked your lives, and with those who gave their lives in the civil rights movement.

So here’s the last question. What do you think? Will God stay constrained – and be held within the circle that says gays and lesbians may not be included in the full life of the church? Or has God already moved outside the circle? Moving in ways that might be new for some of us. Moving in ways that might be confusing even in ways that might make us fearful or even angry?

Doesn’t that sound a little bit like the condition of the Hebrew children on the Exodus? Doesn’t that sound a little bit like Joshua and John? Called to understand something new, something that was confusing, something that made them afraid – and sometimes even angry? We know that God was with the Hebrew people and Joshua as they completed their journey. We know that God was with the disciples as they continued to grow into an understanding of their relationship with Jesus.

Why shouldn’t the church know that God is with us, now? Joshua and the Hebrews
had more to learn about their relationship with God. John and the disciples had more to learn about their relationship with God. It shouldn’t be surprising for the church to realize, that we still have more to learn about our relationship with God.

We are a people designed by God who are desperate to be in relationship with God. God’s relationship to us is not in doubt. God knows and loves each of us for the person that we are. God sees us with no labels attached, with no recognition of the color of our skin, without consideration of our wealth or of our poverty, irregardless of our youth, our age, our maturity, or our immaturity. God relationship with us is one that claims us as a friend. A person with a name and a face.

We are fully known – yet still freely loved by God.

People created in the image of God.

Thanks be to God.

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1 When Christ was lifted from the earth
his arms stretched out above
through every culture, every birth
to draw an answering love.

Still east and west
his love extends
and always, near or far,
he calls and claims us as his friends
and loves us as we are.

Where generation, class, or race
divide us to our shame
he sees not labels,
but a face
a person, and a name.
Thus freely loved,
though fully known
may I in Christ be free
to welcome and accept his own
as Christ accepted me.