

The True Believers

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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We never know for sure who is a true believer. For much of Church history, we thought that we could know this for sure and the answer was simple: true believers were those who belonged to the Church. In other words, if you were baptized, attended services, and submitted to the pope, you were by necessity a true believer. This mindset was challenged by the Protestant reformers of the 16th century, who convincingly taught that exterior membership in the Church doesn't necessarily mean that one is interiorly a believer. In fact, they came up with this idea as a result of seeing so many Christians (especially the clergy) living double lives and not being faithful to God. I think it is now an established fact in Christian theology that we never know for sure who a true believer is.

Our Gospel today highlights the fact that true believers are hard to identify. They are a shifting and fluid group. As we heard in the parable, the king sent his servants out to invite guests to his son's wedding feast not once, not twice, but three times! It took three times to get it right, and even then there was still a problem with one of the guests. The point is that just because someone is invited doesn't mean that they will actually show up. Just because someone is externally a believer doesn't mean they are internally really so. In Jesus' own words, "many are invited, but few are chosen."

There is a certain harshness to Jesus' parable today that can offend us. We like to think that all those who are called are also

chosen, including ourselves. The Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated it just as harshly. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote, “it is our opinion that if Jesus himself and Jesus alone with his word were among us in our preaching, then quite a different set of people would hear the word and quite a different set of people would turn away from it.” (Preface) From his perspective, it is very humbling to realize that if Jesus himself were here today, perhaps our congregations would look different. Just because we are here now or were born into the church does not guarantee that we are actually chosen.

We do not know who the true believers are; only God knows.

I say all this because there is a positive side. It suggests to us that there are still good people out in the world who are willing to hear Jesus. There are people who have not yet been invited, but will be invited at some point and quite possibly be chosen. In fact, it was the guests invited the third and final time in the parable that had the most chosen people in their midst. This should give us reason to hope.

As we continue with this mass, let us leave aside the question of who is and who isn't a true believer. Instead, let us ask ourselves the question Bonhoeffer never tired of asking throughout his life, “who is Jesus Christ today?” And, as a follow up, if Jesus were preaching today, would we walk away?