Jesus visits Peter at the Pearly Gates and asks how things are going.  “Well,” says St. Peter, “I have a complaint. You know, Lord, I’m scrupulous about my job here.  I interview each soul arriving at the Gate of Heaven, and I check to see if his or her name is written in the Book of Life.  I turn away the people not worthy to enter heaven, but a little while later I turn around and I see those very people wandering around on the inside!  I don’t get it! What’s going on?”
     “Oh.  That’s my mother for you,” replied Jesus.  “Those people you turn away - she keeps letting them in through the back door.” (old joke, it said on the website where I found it.)

It may be an old joke, but this is the first time I’ve read it. It’s on the website of Suzanne Guthrie, an episcopal priest and author in (I think) northern California. The website is called “At the Edge of the Enclosure,” and I’m glad I’ve discovered it.

Now: John, one of the disciples we read about the most, has tattled to Jesus about some guy casting out demons in Jesus’ name. “We tried to stop him,” he said, “because he was not following us.” Looks like he was anticipating Peter’s assigned role as doorman and keeper of the keys.

That anecdote hits me right between the eyes, because way too often, I’m channeling John as he appears here, deciding who in the Christian world is doing it right and who’s not. I don’t like saying that, but I’m told that confession is good for the soul.

Jesus’ stern response to John is something along the lines of “why don’t you worry about your own business and not stick your nose into other people’s?” His words, as we have them recorded and translated into English, are “Whoever is not against us is for us.” He seems to still be holding that kid in front of him, using her as an illustration, saying, “If you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me . . .” and goes on to say how bad it will be for someone who does that. (Maybe he lets the little kid go back to her mom at this point, having served her purpose.)

It’s not a new story, even when John tells on this unknown character. There were tattletales during Exodus, some 1500 years earlier, telling Moses that Eldad and Medad were trying to pull a fast one, staying back in the camp to prophesy. Not only that, they hadn’t checked in at the registration desk of the tent when they were supposed to.

People are so unwieldy and so prone to disobey orders and not follow regulations. We Episcopalians love orders and regulations and . . . well, just the right and orderly way to do things.

James, with all his talk about doing the right thing, is right at home here, and he puts me to shame, at least sometimes. In last week’s passage from his letter he wrote, “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

He might have been thinking of this incident when he wrote about faith without works being dead.

A point, if not THE point, is that Jesus was concerned about making the good news of God’s love known in every way possible. He did not seem to be concerned about rules of religious etiquette nearly so much as helping people come to life—having life and having it abundantly. In fact his whole ministry brims with examples people using the rules to avoid taking the right and loving action.

The Collect for today put me off a bit by its focus on praying that we “become partakers of God’s heavenly treasure.” It sounded a bit self-serving to me, as opposed to ending on a note of using God’s grace to help others. I’ve rethought that, though, because these readings help us to see that the heavenly treasure is to be found here and now, in humble acts of kindness towards others, in carrying the good news into every situation in our lives, manifesting it in our actions regardless of the words we use to accompany those actions.

May God grant us all the grace to receive that boundless love and to carry it to others in all we do.

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