

SWEET AND SOUR

The only organization I know of that takes inspiration from the second letter of John is the Order of the Eastern Star. The church secretary in my first parish was the highest, most-exalted, glorious potentate – I could never remember the exact title, but something like that – of the Eastern Star for the entire state of Massachusetts. I do not know anything about the order, but I used to tease her that she did not know much about it either. A lot of the meaning and symbolism apparently focused around some of the famous women of the Bible. One of them was Electa. So I asked Ethel, “Who was Electa? What did she do?” And Ethel said, “I don’t know, but she was very important.”

I was only about twenty-five and did not know yet how careful you have to be not to offend your secretary. So I asked, “Are you sure Electa is somebody mentioned in the Bible?” And she said, “Oh yes.” When I asked where, she said, “I don’t know exactly, but she’s in there.”

So then I asked, “Why is it called the Eastern Star?” And she said, “Because of the Christian star. You know, at Christmas – the one the wise men followed. You are supposed to know these things.” And I said, “Ethel, I do know these things, and there is nothing in the Bible about any wise men following an eastern star.” Now, she did know where *that* passage was, so she got out the Bible and showed me Matthew 2:2: “*For we have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him.*” And she explained how traveling east had been symbolic of seeking truth and spiritual enlightenment ever since.

Then I gleefully got out my map and asked her to show me where the wise men had come from that they could travel east and end up in Bethlehem. That led to many delightful discussions about camels with water wings, and how rumors get started with careless reading of information. And I would say things like, “How can you be the highest, most-exalted, glorious potentate of the Eastern Star and not know that the star was in the west or who Electa was, when these are foundation principles of your whole order?” And then she would say ... things I will not repeat here.

In John’s second letter, Electa – the elect lady – refers to the church. The letter assumes that the church is made up of special people – the lucky ones, the chosen, the elect. John knows we are not saved by any special merit, brains, or behavior of our own.

Yet the church is the elect lady – the lucky ones who are called out of aimlessness and sin into the special grace and purpose and love of God in Christ.

The other day I was talking to an AA friend and got a fresh demonstration of how this kind of thinking developed in the early church. My friend was saying how he considered those of us in AA to be the lucky ones. Out of the thousands of us destroying and being destroyed by the disease of alcoholism, only a few of us get the incredible blessing of finding ourselves in the program, where we then find the program so helpful that we often catch ourselves feeling sorry for “normal” people. There was no pride whatsoever in my friend’s comments. He was simply feeling grateful.

It suddenly dawned on me that this was precisely what happened in the early church. People were released from their guilt and fear and from feeling worthless and hopeless about life. They realized that, through no merit or fault of their own, they had found themselves in the incredible fellowship of the church and were being filled by the grace and power of the Gospel Message. They felt grateful and wished everybody could get a taste of what they had found. Generations later, their comments – now canon Scripture – were perceived as a doctrine of exclusion and judgment, rather than as simple comments of wonder and gratitude.

Today, the selectivity and exclusiveness make us uneasy, and rightly so. We do not want to be ungrateful for all God has done for us, or unmindful of all that Jesus went through and endured to reveal greater truth and to reconcile us to God. On the other hand, we know atheists, humanists, Buddhists, Muslims, etc. who are pretty nice people. Whatever any of them believe, it is my belief that God loves them as much as God loves us.

When John wrote, the church was still quite small, and Judaism was widespread, well-established, and very influential. Frequently, that influence cost Christians their property, jobs, and lives. The animosity between brothers is always hottest because neither can believe that the other will not come around. John’s writings in the New Testament reveal his anger and pain. Those writings in turn have inspired countless generations to maintain the tragic separation. Christians in various ways and times have “repaid” the Jews a thousand times over and more, and many of us are ashamed and deeply regretful of that part of our history. Yet it is still our history.

If the Pope wants to make pronouncements that are helpful and important, he should drop the subject of birth control (a subject that seems beyond his grasp) and instead say, “We [the church] are sorry for the way we have spoken and acted and treated God’s Jewish children and all the other children who have disagreed with us over the centuries. We do not repeal our faith or the truth by which we believe we are being saved. But we would affirm our fundamental Christian truth that God loves all the people outside the church at least as much as God loves those inside the church. And while we naturally claim that inside the church is a wonderful path and the best way of life on earth, we wish courage and endurance to all spiritual pilgrims, and hope we can be as warm and helpful a friend to all of them in the future as we have been a scourge and enemy to them in the past.”

I am not trying to put words into the Pope’s mouth, although I would if there were any way in the world I thought I could. But back to reality. I am using this example to illustrate how a lot of us feel today, and how troubled we feel about the flavor of exclusiveness and the “we alone will be saved” attitude that seems to permeate so much of the Christian tradition and concept. It is a “sweet and sour” experience to explore and struggle with many of our basic Christian assumptions and beliefs.

It is sweet to contemplate Jesus’ incredible devotion and love and obedience. It is sweet to begin to discern that this opens for us the possibility of daily and constant experience in the presence of His Holy Spirit. It is sweet to begin to realize and feel that this changes us from within – grants us peace and confidence and a deep inner joy, and a hope for the future that is beyond all human language. It is sour indeed to add to this any hint or indication that anyone without the same experience or the same awareness and conviction is somehow outside of God’s care, or consigned to some kind of special punishment or displeasure from the God of love.

It is sweet to hear in John’s second letter that we are the elect – the ones God has especially set aside and chosen. It is sweet to be reminded that love is the primary principle of our fellowship – that we are called and chosen not only to receive love, but to learn to love one another. It is sour to have this same letter, without break or explanation, flow smoothly on from words and concepts of love into a diatribe against anybody who does not acknowledge Jesus Christ in the flesh. Suddenly we are calling them deceivers, linking them with the Antichrist.

The loving letter to the elect lady ends with the demand that we are to utterly reject, condemn, and refuse to associate with anybody who does not see or understand things exactly the way we do.

It is sweet to think of the church as a fellowship of believers – of people seeking together and growing and sharing and learning together – supporting each other, in ways large and small, through the turmoil and sorrow and joy and potential of this life’s experience. But it is sour if the church is self-righteous or smug or thinks it has all the answers, or admits only those who think according to prescribed ways. It is sour if the church talks or feels like a group of superior citizens, instead of like a family of sinners who help each other unreservedly, knowing everybody needs all the help they can get.

It is difficult to rejoice completely or enjoy spontaneously, when we keep getting a mixture of sweet and sour. It is also hard to invite others freely, when we are half-delighted and half-ashamed of who we are and what we represent.

As if that were not enough, the sweet and sour analogy flips around the other way too. It may be sweet to see more and more people in our time who want to be inclusive; who see and long for a greater unity between all peoples, lands, and religions; who want to heal the ancient rifts at last, and build bridges between all the alienated brothers and sisters and traditions.

But it is sour, bitter indeed, that these same people so often have little or no comprehension or experience of the Gospel. Flitting around the edges or over the surface of Christianity, they seem to have missed the core of the atonement. Jesus is not really the Christ to them. The Cross and the Resurrection seem only stories to them, akin to George Washington’s cherry tree or Aesop’s fox that decided the grapes were sour because he could not reach them.

If you have never tasted the real grace of Jesus Christ to begin with, it is easy to talk about giving up Christianity’s exclusive claims – giving up the core and tradition and faith of the church – and becoming universal and all-inclusive. What seems logical, intelligent, and civilized to some, remains unthinkable for some of the rest of us. And we forget that some people do not realize the incomparable loss if Jesus Christ gets homogenized into a figment of modern Western imagination. If the truth is already in you because *you* are really God or part of God or because you are your own salvation or your own savior, there is no need for prayer, for revelation, for guidance from the Holy Spirit.

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Sour indeed! The word is suddenly quite inadequate. I sometimes have trouble keeping kind thoughts for fundamentalists, but I would turn Pentecostal long before I would swallow pabulum like that! (Not that they would have me ...)

Despite the sweet and sour, the church is still mostly sweet for me. I think the institutional church is a silly, inadequate, contradictory, irritating, feeble shadow of what it ought to be. Its people fuss and fizzle, fight and fume, get bored and forget all their vows and disciplines, get lost in details, and all the rest. But the institutional church, despite all of this, is still the best institution this world has seen so far. And, far more impressive to me, it can still connect with the invisible church that truly *is* the body of Christ.

So I know it is sweet and sour. And I am glad we can share that together and not try to sweep it under any prayer rugs. We are the church in our day, and we have the privilege and responsibility of shaping it according to the measure of our own faith and prayer and experience.