

January 28, 2024  
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

**Meditation:** "In and Out"

This week I've been thinking of In and Out. I remember when I turned 16 I could hardly wait to get my 365, but alas I was born in January and my mother would have nothing to do with my learning to drive in her car in the snow, so I had to wait for spring melt. When the snow was almost all gone, I was allowed to get my permit and start the process of learning to drive.

Mom didn't think it was a good idea for me to learn where there were other cars and cyclists and pedestrians using the road, so she took me just out of town to the quieter concession roads. Now, you have to realize, while the snow was mostly gone, there were still traces of it in the deep ditches along the concession roads, and the ground was saturated with water, including the dirt roads. The other things to keep in mind is that these roads were narrow and I had grown up in town, never having had the opportunity to drive a tractor or pickup truck around the fields.

I got behind the wheel of the car and started off. It didn't take long before a pickup truck came the other way. I wanted to make sure we didn't collide, so I pulled over a little. Now my mother, not used to sitting in the passenger seat, thought we were a little too close to the edge of the soft road and the ditch. In my defense, I neither hit the truck, nor rolled the car into the ditch.

Mom took over the driving and on the way home we stopped at the In and Out store. The In and Out store was located just below the brow of the hill on a very busy two lane road. There were two laneways and people were forever using whichever entrance or exit they pleased. This led to more than one fender bender. Eventually the store designated one laneway as the entrance and one as the exit, and put up arrows 'In' and 'Out', henceforth known in town as the In and Out Store. Mom went in, went to the counter, got a slip of paper and filled it out, took it to the service counter and handed it to a man, who went into the back and returned with her purchase, took her money and mom came out. We went home and mom soothed her troubled nerves with two fingers worth of her purchase.

In the gospel today we read about the man who had an unclean spirit in him. Even though it was the Sabbath and under Jewish Rabbinical law no work was to be done, Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and ordered it to come out of the man. What was in, came out. The more I thought about this passage, the more ins and outs I noticed. Illness or possession by an unclean spirit is OUT. Healing and wholeness of body, mind and spirit is IN.

This past Wednesday was the annual Bell, Let's Talk day, where they donate 5 cents from every call or text to mental health programs. It raises the profile of mental health issues and makes them an important topic of conversation, instead of being a taboo subject. More importantly, it points out that we all have our moments when we struggle with our mental health. We need to be accepting and supportive of those who are struggling.

Social ostracism is OUT.

Community is IN.

Is it all Israel's fault, or is it all the fault of Hamas? Which group is right, and which is wrong? Neither, and both is the right answer. Yet one look at the news of the protests and claims of antisemitism and even the global rise of antisemitism show that we love to take sides and lay blame in simplistic ways. For example, did you know that Palestinians are also a semitic people, so how can support for one side be antisemitism? Judgementalism is OUT. That is God's job, and Jesus seems to be ditching it too. Grace is IN.

We may not have what the Bible describes as unclean spirits, but one look at the streets of our cities and towns reveals that there are many suffering from debilitating mental illnesses and/or addiction to drugs – both of which destroy their lives. Being held in bondage by an unclean spirit, or anything else, is OUT. Liberation is IN.

I just can't understand the loyalty of some people to particular belief systems when there is evidence that the system of belief is faulty – take the insistence on the part of some that vaccines are somehow attempts on the part of the state to control our thought and behaviour, and not an attempt to keep us safe and alive. Sticking with a belief system and acting on it, even to our own detriment, is something I don't understand. Being strict (as in strict adherence to some human rule) or ham fisted (as with one's gifts, financial or otherwise) is OUT. Generosity is IN.

The rise of partisan politics and of nationalism and of racism is a concern around the world right now. We see some states in the US banning people of colour from voting, and insisting that slavery was to the benefit of people of colour. We see strife between religious and cultural groups in Serbia and Croatia, in Uzbekistan, in India, and in many other parts of the world that threaten justice and peace. Protecting our own little group or territory is OUT. Collaborating with others for the benefit of all is IN.

Continuing to do things the way they have always been done, because, well, because they have always been done that way, or out of fear of change is OUT. Embracing new opportunities is IN.

The way this world operates is OUT.

The way the world would run if God were in charge, in other words, the dominion of God, is IN.

This line of thinking made me wonder, what in our society ought to be out and what ought to be in? Rugged individualism, you know, the 'ME' generation that seems to have run to the extreme - out, and more focus on family and community in? Absolute individual human rights, I can do whatever I want to no matter how it may affect anybody else around me - out, and social responsibility, I should pay my taxes without grouching so the sick can have health care and the children can be educated - in? Can anyone else think of anything that should be out and/or in?

About this point in thinking about things I thought, so what? What does this have to do with anything? Well, as followers of Jesus, ever since the ascension, it isn't up to Jesus to:

cast out unclean spirits,

heal,

put an end to the marginalization or the ostracization of individuals or groups,

stop judging,

cut bonds,

put an end to miserliness,

put an end to the way the world has always operated,

and bring in:

healing and wholeness,

inclusion of and welcome to all,

liberty,

generosity, and

grace, and

the dominion of God on earth as it is in heaven.

It's up to us to do those things. May it be so. Amen.