

In Arlington Heights, Massachusetts, there is a convent, where 4 Episcopal nuns, make up the remaining Order of St. Anne Bethany, a small fraction of the Order's former days, when they had houses in the Philippines, England, China, New Zealand, Chicago, Wisconsin, the Virgin Islands, Denver, Colorado, and in Massachusetts, they had houses in Lincoln, Cambridge, Boston, Foxborough, and their original convent in Arlington Heights.

Several decades ago a wise lay woman, and a close friend of the sisters, worked with the sisters, at their request, to develop one of their vacant houses into a place for spiritual direction and retreats, and so Bethany House of Prayer was born.

The wise woman who founded Bethany House of Prayer, called Julia Slayton, used a word to describe the spiritual directors, who worked theret—she called them alongsiders. Alongsiders.

When I first heard Julia use the word it was, to my ear, terribly peculiar. In reply, Julia said, “well, that’s what we do here, we come alongside people, and we come alongside the Sisters, and God comes alongside us; we’re all alongsiders.

The word for today is alongside.

This morning God comes alongside, something God does all the time, to strengthen our faith, to embolden our witness outside of this church so that with God's help we can return the world to peace.

God comes also to proclaim the glorious good news that in baptism Iris will be fully incorporated into the Body of Christ, symbolically dying with Christ, and then rising with him to newness of life. All of you, and Iris's parents and Godparents, and Amanda, and me, and the whole communion of saints, will be alongside Iris for the rest of her days on this earth.

There's something else we're doing today, something none of us has ever done. We're coming alongside Amanda, her family, and one another as she makes a formal commitment to exercise her ordained ministry alongside the Episcopal Church.

We have to get something clear immediately, which is to say what this is not. It's not a step-up, or a graduation, or an accomplishment, or a prize. And it's not like unto a heart transplant; we're not taking out Amanda's Lutheran heart and replacing it with an Anglican one. She has the same heart!

She is coming alongside a different church, but it doesn't in anyway discount the decades of exceeding faithfulness as a generation-long Lutheran, and one of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's most gifted pastors.

That's because Amanda and Jesus Christ have been alongsiders to one another since Amanda baptism, and that is from everlasting and for everlasting.

Instead, she is saying, "yes" to coming alongside God's people within the Episcopal Church. We're doing this while I'm with you, because Amanda will make a vow—as every deacon, priest, and bishop does—to conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church.

But the serendipity is not lost on any of us, is it, that we're doing this on the Sunday before Reformation Day!

There's something else about the word "alongside" and it leaps in front of us because of the gospel reading from St. Luke.

Amy-Jill Levine is a New Testament scholar, and a Jew, and she consistently challenges the antisemitism that's embedded in our translation and interpretation of the New Testament. And she does this with tremendous humor.

Our text from St. Luke pits two Jews against each other—a pharisee who is arrogant, and a tax collector who is repentant. But Professor Levine has Jesus saying the closing line this way: "To you I say, descending to his house, this one, the tax collector, is justified, alongside that one, the pharisee."

Alongside.

Professor Levine helps us by underscoring that in Greek the pesky preposition *para* can be translated “rather than” or “instead of” and it can also mean “alongside.” Suddenly everything is changed because *both* the Pharisee *and* the tax collector were justified, receivers of mercy and forgiveness, made right in relationship with God.

How can it be that both of them are justified? How can it be that both of them receive God’s mercy and grace?

What if Jesus told the whole story not to illustrate the character of either the Pharisee or the tax collector but rather to illustrate the character of God? Think about the text showing us God, and how God chooses to behave. In this moment in our national life, where many elected leaders exhibit no grace or any sense of mercy, we must remind ourselves of God’s nature.

The text portrays a Pharisee and a tax collector who behaved in ways first century readers would not have understood: the pharisee was puffed up, instead of humble; the tax collector was repentant, instead of greedy.

So why, then, would we assume God would behave in a way that made sense to us? For what makes sense to us is for God to choose one *rather* than the other, *instead* of the other, to receive God’s mercy and forgiveness. But that is not what God does.

God chooses to bestow mercy and forgiveness on *both* Pharisee and tax collector, saint and sinner, religious leader and scoundrel, one *alongside* the other, completely ignoring our rules of what is fair or expected or even logical.

If the word is alongside, maybe the question for each of us is “how will we come alongside just now?” I ask this question in its broadest possibilities: will you come alongside Jesus Christ in such a way that others will see your joy and be encouraged by your sense of justice? Will you continue to come alongside each other, and your pastor and priest, so that together you will be alongsiders for the wider communities in this part of Cumberland County? In turn, you should ask me, “will you, Thomas, join us to make sure the whole church in Maine comes alongside people with whom coming alongside is hard, hard work?”

If we say “yes” to these questions it will, of course, reflect our will, but its actual manifestation, the truth of our being alongsiders, comes from God alone, what Martin Luther described as “*sole fide*”—faith alone—and with that nothing else matters, and without that, nothing else matters.