



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 19 – Proper 21 Year B

Look for the Commonality

[RCL]: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

In today's gospel, we hear the intriguing story of Jesus' disciples trying to stop a man who had been casting out demons in Jesus' name. They seem to have become especially upset because the offender was not one of them. In the eyes of the disciples, he was not part of the inner circle, and he was acting differently from what they considered to be the norm.

As soon as Jesus heard about it, he turned the tables on his closest followers and rebuked their blind, unbending exclusiveness. He told them not to stop the man, because whatever good is done in Jesus' name would put him in a situation of not speaking evil of the Lord. And tellingly, Jesus concluded, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Jesus made it clear that he and his disciples were not a little clique, working in a corner of life, fenced off from others. His world view, his God's-eye view, made him well aware that God's actions are not limited to the forms with which his disciples were familiar.

What is the lesson in this for us? Don't Jesus' words ring true as a rebuke of our often blind and unbending exclusiveness, our arrogant assumptions that God's action among us is limited to forms with which we are most comfortable and most familiar?

What Jesus taught his disciples is equally a lesson for us. Christians cannot fence themselves off from others who have different ways of following Jesus and of finding God. The one who is not against us is for us. The one who is not against Jesus is on the side of Christ.

In this, our Lord gives us a model for a broader view. There is an issue of tolerance. Doesn't Jesus' message to the disciples help us stop short when we fall into the all too common trap of thinking in terms of "us" and "them" – seeing life only from the perspective of our own groups?

Intolerance of the other is certainly an attitude that Jesus rejected in today's gospel reading. Possibly, he realized that the disciples considered the man casting out demons as a threat to their inner-circle status. He was an outsider, so they tried to stop him. Jesus rejected this by making it clear that only in a more narrow sense can one be an outsider.

What was true for the disciples has been true throughout history. The world and the church have fought for centuries in such a fence-building frenzy. The stories of the past schisms and divisions are legion. And living out the tendencies of the same human nature, we still act this way in our time, don't we?

Standing against this, Jesus' words remind us that Christianity is not the preserve of a privileged few. He reminds us that no one seeking to do the Lord's work is an outsider. He reminds us to welcome all people who are willing to join the journey, following our Lord. Over and over again, Jesus' words remind us to be including – not excluding. Over and over again, Jesus' words rebuke us when we turn against others because they are different. Over and over again, the life Jesus lived and the way he taught his first disciples remind us of the scandal of our divisions.

There is another side to this, of course. Sometimes, conscience and practicality dictate that we separate ourselves from others, but the message here, at the very least, is not to do so lightly – not to draw a line in the sand except as a last resort. Jesus helps us work against the subtle temptation to think that “for me to be right, anyone who disagrees with me must be wrong.”

Jesus seems to be telling the disciples something like this: “Look for the commonality. Recognize that there are many among you who might work or think differently, but don't jump to the conclusion that that makes them against you – or against me.”

He warns us against simplistic solutions to complex problems. He causes us to see that truth is always bigger than any one person's, or any one group's grasp of it. Jesus cautions us against inflexibility of thought or deed. He helps us embrace tolerance of a variety of actions and viewpoints. He helps us re-learn what is so easy to forget: that diversity is not only good; it is absolutely essential for the health of the Body of Christ.

Today's gospel reinforces a belief that what we need in the church is less “either/or” and more “both/and.”

Where do we find commonality? Why not begin by looking to our earliest roots? Those who can declare that “Jesus is Lord” are not against us, and therefore are for us, and for Christ. Those who can follow the steps of Jesus, taking up their crosses and denying themselves for the sake of God and God's children are not against us, and therefore are for us, and for Christ.

The story of today's gospel is about the disciples' attempt to draw a circle around Jesus and themselves – shutting out the one who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. Perhaps a concise, powerful poem by Edwin Markham can help us remember that Jesus ordered the disciples not to exclude that man and to recall that those who are not against us are for us.

In his poem “Outwitted,” Edwin Markham writes:

“He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.”

This sermon, written by the Rev. Ken Kesselus, originally ran September 27, 2009.