

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Whose Side Are You On?”

September 27, 2009

Mark 9:38-50

38 John said to him, ‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’³⁹ But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me.⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us.⁴¹ For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

42 ‘If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.’⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

49 ‘For everyone will be salted with fire.⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.’

Linda Petracelli, a United Church of Christ minister, tells a tale about a little girl who attended a very strict Catholic school. One day her teacher, Sister Mary Roberts Cecilia, preached a very important lesson about salvation to the classroom. She told them that everyone, especially the Lutherans and the Episcopalians who worshipped down the street, everyone who was not Catholic was going to hell. While many of the children were frightened, the little girl did not seem affected. When she returned home from school that night, her mother greeted her with the usual end of school day question; “What are you thankful for today?” Without hesitation the little girl answered, “I am thankful that Sister Mary Roberts Cecilia is not God!”

Last spring, as I was walking to my car to head home from the office, another car pulled up in the parking lot in front of me. The gentleman inside lowered his window and introduced himself as a minister of a new church in this area. He carried a flyer of a program that the church was hosting, something of which he was certain the members of my congregation would be interested. I was not quite as excited at this attempt to minister to “my people” but I told him that I would at least put in on our bulletin board. The gentleman then spoke about how he very excited about his ministry and about the prospects of the new church. He said that we was glad his new church could do things the way Jesus intended, without having to worry about paying for a building or

maintaining years of tradition. Whether intentional or not he seemed to be saying that his new church was doing things the right way and that my old church was failing miserably. I must admit that I felt a little angry at this apparent outsider who did not seem to have any authority or history making judgments about me and my church. I hadn't heard of his church. I hadn't seen him at any clergy meetings. Where did he get off talking to me like that!

I recall the day my spouse got an invitation from a community college to take classes toward a degree in nutrition therapy. She read the information and discovered the degree could be achieved in six months. That is when the smoke started coming out of Laura's ears. To become a registered dietitian you see, Laura had to get a bachelor's degree, serve an 11 month internship, pass a registration exam, pay an annual fee to the American Dietetic Association and spend a promised number of hours in annual education. It peeved her to learn that someone else could claim a similar authority by taking a six month course at a community college.

I have a friend who is an ophthalmologist. If you really want to get him going, try calling him an optometrist. He will immediately go into a ten minute lecture on the specialized training and expertise which have awarded him the title of an ophthalmologist.

Perhaps it is just human nature to look down upon those who claim a certain authority without paying the price of experience or authenticity. We might all be resentful of those who claim to be as legitimate as we are without first walking the path that brought us to where we are today. As Hubert Humphrey once said, "Though everyone has the right to speak, not all have earned the same right to be taken seriously."

Perhaps it is human nature to emphasize that we sets us apart as exclusive. Carl Sandburg once said that "Exclusive" is the ugliest word in the English language. Still, being an insider carries with it a great deal of pride and security. We like belonging to groups and places and we enjoy the privileges that such belonging brings. When threatened with loss or when feeling insecure- we circle the wagons around that which we know and trust. When we are afraid we identify perceived enemies and we do what we can to resist them. We find assurance in determining who is "in" and who is "out." It helps to support our ideas and our ways of thinking and being. It helps to discount the hair-brained notions and even the existence of those who think and act differently than we do. We have probably heard and seen too much of this kind of behavior from both sides in the current debate over political and national issues.

As illustrated in my opening story, organized religion is not without its desire to find strength in being exclusive. Individual faiths define salvation and then document the narrow path that leads to God through their doors. We use denominational titles and labels like "liberal" and "conservative" or "evangelical" and "progressive" to define who we are and who is on the outside of us in a place where we really don't want to be. We shake our heads at the practices of the so-called "megachurches," saying they don't do anything like a church should. The new churches which reflect a different culture shake their heads at us wondering why we are so resistant to change. As evidenced by my feelings with the clergy colleague in our parking lot, ministers are some of the worst at dividing and then choosing sides. A few years ago I spent a summer attending worship services at other churches. I had to fight the urge of being critical instead of

simply observing to learn. I had to throw out the initial feeling I had that these churches were doing worship wrong so I could admit they were simply doing things differently.

The Scripture lesson teaches us about drawing lines and choosing sides. Jesus' disciples were a little more than upset that day long ago. Apparently some outsider, someone distant from the group, some fraud, had been healing people and claiming to do so in the name of Jesus the Christ. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Rather than recognizing any goodness or grace in what was being done, the disciples were angry because the healing was being done by someone else, someone different from them. Who gave these people the right to heal? They didn't get their expertise at the feet of Jesus! They were not eyewitnesses to his miracles! They did not receive a personal call while fishing at the shore of the Sea of Galilee!

Jesus responded, "Don't try to stop this person. Let him continue to heal. No one who performs a miracle in my name will be able to say evil things about me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

This was an important lesson for the disciples. Their group was not to be exclusive. This was an important lesson for the early church. They were not to waste their time deciding who was "in" and who was "out." In order for the Kingdom of God to grow, margins needed to be increased and barriers needed to be broken down. Through Jesus the Christ, God had come to embrace all believers- Jew and Gentile alike.

The gospel of Mark then includes this warning: do not put a stumbling block before one of the little ones who believe in me." Do not hinder those who might come to faith differently than you have. Do not be as concerned about proving you are right, than you are about following the intention of God which calls you to reach out in love to others.

The story teaches a lesson to us today. When we try to confine God's presence and power to ourselves and our own way of thinking and acting, we simply distort the gospel message. When we believe God acts only as we wish God to act, we diminish the power of God. When we judge others by whether or not they are "one of us" and when we criticize the ideas of others simply because they are different than our own we limit the generous and joyous presence of God in the world. Jesus taught that we cannot confine God to one people, one place, and one institution. He challenged others to see God's presence on the other side of the fence. The assumption that only those "on our side" could do the work of God blinds us to the very presence of God in one another.

Jesus had a history of working through outsiders. There was a Good Samaritan, a tax collector, a foreign woman at the well, and a religious persecutor on the road to Damascus. Nothing hinders the work of God more than when we try to keep others out. When we try to confine the truth of God to our own way of being, to our own worship, and to our own ideas of Scripture and theology- we have already let the presence of God slip through our hands.