

“Judge Yourself, Not Others”

Today’s gospel lesson from Mark is rather loosely put together and seems to reflect problems in Mark’s church. I see at least four sermons in this passage, so I decided to focus my attention, as well as your attention, on the first part ... Mark 9:38-40 ... in order to give exclusive consideration to the “unknown exorcist” and the response of the disciples to this unauthorized performer of good deeds. I believe Jesus is teaching his disciples, as well as us, a lesson in tolerance. We live in a world today that desperately needs a lesson in *tolerance*. We experience more and more the polarization of people holding different beliefs supported by opinions rather than truth. We see the results of radical, militant behavior caused by intolerance, arrogance, and stupidity.

If I were to take a survey, I believe I would find that we are a people today far more angry and judgmental than we were six years ago. Who are the world leaders today that are working for the “common good” for the whole of humanity? Nationalism on a global scale is ripping a part the political, social, and environmental fabric of God’s creation.

First, let us never forget that the Christian faith is founded upon a man from Nazareth, who came not to condemn the world but to make the world whole. Around that man we have constructed a religion called Christianity ... an institution we called the church ... and an empire known historically as Christendom. Jesus Christ’s whole being, his mission, his ministry was not self-centered, but centered in us, centered in his absolute belief that there is no one of any race, class, religion, gender or age who is ever excluded from the grace, the love and acceptance of God, and God’s vision of wholeness. For any church to survive, it must become and remain a means of grace.

We take our clue from Jesus who never attempted to force belief on those unfriendly to his message. As committed Christians, we ought not have a hostile attitude toward people whose outlook is incompatible with our faith. Laying aside all judgment, it is our mission as individual believers to remain faithful to our belief, and to live our faith to the fullest as members of Christ’s church. And as a church, as a faith community, we must be characterized not only by fidelity, but by careful theological reflection, hospitality, graciousness, and a common celebration of good whenever that good is done by whomever it is effected.

As we have seen over and over again, in the time of Jesus, everyone believed in demons. Everyone believed that both mental and physical illness was caused by the malign influence of these evil spirits. Now there was one very common way to exorcise them. If one could get to know the name of a still more powerful spirit and command the evil demon in that name to come out of a person, the demon was supposed to be powerless to resist. It could not stand against the might of the more powerful name.

This is the kind of picture we have in today’s lesson. John had seen a man using the all-powerful name of Jesus to defeat the demons and he tried to stop him, because he was not one of Jesus’ disciples. However, Jesus declared that no man could do a mighty work in his name and be altogether his enemy. Then Jesus laid down the great principle that “he who is not against us is for us”. This is definitely a lesson in tolerance!

Every person has a right to their own thoughts. Every person has a right to think things out and to think them through until they come to their own conclusions and their own beliefs. And that is a right we should respect. We are often too quick to condemn what we do not understand. William Penn once said, *Neither despise nor oppose what thou dost not understand*. There are two things we must remember. First, there is more than one way to God. Tennyson wrote, “God fulfills Himself in many ways.” And Cervantes once said, “Many are the roads by which God carries His own to heaven.” The world is round, and two people can get to precisely the same destination by starting out in precisely opposite directions. All roads, if we pursue them long enough and far enough, lead to God. It is a fearful thing for any person or any church to think that they, or it has a monopoly on salvation.

The second thing to remember is that truth is always bigger than anyone’s grasp of it. No person can possibly grasp all truth. The basis of tolerance is not a lazy acceptance of anything, or the feeling that there

cannot be assurance anywhere. The basis of tolerance is simply the realization of the magnitude of the orb of truth. One author writes, *Tolerance means reverence for all the possibilities of truth ... it means acknowledgment that truth dwells in various houses, wears garments of many colors, and speaks in strange tongues. Tolerance means frank respect for freedom of indwelling conscience against mechanical forms, official conventions, and social force. It means the charity that is greater than faith or hope.* Intolerance is a sign of both arrogance and ignorance, for it is a sign that a person believes that there is no truth beyond the truth they see.

In the final analysis, any doctrine or belief must be judged by the kind of people it produces. Another author writes: *Who cares about any church but as an instrument of Christian good. The question is not how a church is governed but what kind of people does that church produce.* Listen to this old eastern fable:

A man possessed a ring set with a wonderful opal. Whoever wore the ring became so sweet and true in character that all people loved him. The ring was a charm. Always it was passed down from father to son, and always it did its work. As time went on, it came to a father who had three sons whom he loved with an equal love. What was he to do when the time came to pass on the ring? The father had other rings made precisely the same so that none could tell the differences. On his death-bed he called each of his sons in, spoke some words of love ... and without telling the others, gave to each a ring. When the three sons discovered that each had a ring, a great dispute arose as to which was the true ring that could so do much for its owner. The case was taken to a wise judge. He examined the rings and then he spoke. "Yes," said the judge, "for if the true ring gives sweetness to the character of the man who wears it, then I and all the other people in the city will know the man who possesses the true ring by the goodness of his life. So, go your ways, and be kind, be truthful, be brave, be just in your dealings and he who does these things will be the owner of the true ring."

The dilemma was to be resolved by life. No person can entirely condemn beliefs which make a person good. We may hate another person's beliefs, but we must never hate that person. We may wish to eliminate what they teach, but we must not wish to eliminate them, keeping in mind this poem: "He drew a circle that shut me out --- Rebel, heretic, thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win --- I drew a circle that took him in."

Allow me to recap the lesson. The disciples come to Jesus saying, "*Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and tried to stop him, because he was not following us (or not one of us!)*" But Jesus said, "*Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.*" This exchange between Jesus and his disciples is a bit ironic since shortly before this conversation noted in Mark 9:14-29, the disciples were unable to exorcise the unclean spirit from a young boy.

The disciples tried to heal the boy, but they failed. Then an unknown, unlicensed, unproved exorcist shows up and heals people. Now you see? The disciples are criticizing this unknown exorcist for doing what they have failed to do, namely, to cure somebody. Let's say they knew the right words, let's say they had watched Jesus do it a hundred times, but when it came their turn to heal, they failed. So when they ran across this uncredentialed, unlicensed exorcist running around, casting out demons in Jesus names, they ran to tell Jesus about it: "He's not one of us! Make him stop!" Jesus answers them with a word about tolerance. Space has to be made for mavericks and outsiders as long as they are not explicitly opponents of Jesus. The disciples needed to nurture the gift of graciousness and generosity. For after all, God's plan is bigger than us. We can't take it all in. So, Jesus suggests, let us focus on what we have been called to do, without assuming that everything starts and ends with us. If you must be judgmental ... judge yourselves and not others.

God's boundaries are considerably more expansive and gracious than our boundaries. We draw lines between the "insiders" and the "outsiders." We ought never to confuse our boundaries with God's. The Lord we believe in, worship and serve, is not just of this church, but of the whole world. Again, I remind you. It is our mission to remain faithful to our belief and live our faith to the full as members of Christ's church.