

Proper 21B – September 27, 2015
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9: 38-50
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“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Today’s gospel is about the continuing formation of Jesus’ disciples, presumably recorded for our growth and development as well.ⁱ It starts out with a scene in which the disciple John shares on behalf of the other disciples their intolerance regarding someone who was not of their company, so to speak, but who was engaged in a healing ministry—“casting out demons” in Jesus’ name. Such clubby, cliquy, clerical arrogance on the part of the disciples shows that they had not yet come to share fully in the broad vision and purpose of Jesus. To them Jesus responds, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”ⁱⁱ

Part of the essential formation as a Christian is to realize that God’s Spirit and power are *indiscriminately and generously* unleashed upon a world desperately in need. A clear indicator that one has some way to go in his or her spiritual formation is the strength of his or her need to claim the prerogative of God’s Spirit as one’s own, or exclusive to one’s own group. We shouldn’t fault John and the other disciples in our gospel, for their unwillingness to recognize the Spirit of God at work. Instead, we should find in them a reflection of ourselves.

So, let’s be challenged by our gospel today to explore at least one reason for the occasional smallness and exclusivity of our own hearts. This stinginess as regards the work of the Holy Spirit may spring from our misconception of God. We often create God in our own limited image and try to set boundaries on God’s movements. Almost 20 centuries after the writing of Mark’s gospel, we as a denomination and nation and human race still have some ways to go in arriving at the realization that “anyone who is not against us is for us.” The Holy Spirit has always rested on those *within and outside* the church who are called by God. The community of faith does not, and should not, have to worry about tests of membership—“whoever is not against us is for us.” The church in itself does not have proprietary claim on God, nor even on its mission. The Church only has a mission insofar as it joins Christ in his ongoing mission of repairing the world and restoring human hearts into right relationships. And all others who participate in such mission are nonetheless participating in that mission whether they count themselves as part of the church, or are doing so from another context in Christ’s name, or are healing and caring and seeking justice from some other faith tradition, or none at all. “Whoever is not against us is for us.” A good deed done by anybody regardless of their faith or faith tradition reflects the glory of God and makes the Kingdom of God all the more visible. This “whoever is not against us is for us” is an eye-opening discipline to practice. God is everywhere and God is always at work on God’s ongoing mission. Our task is to join that mission and find, in doing so, a whole new set of surprising relationships. Many times the church has tried to block the action of the Holy Spirit and acted as oppressor rather than liberator. But the Holy Spirit is present nonetheless wherever, and through whomever, healing is happening, peace is proclaimed, justice is struggled for, or suffering is lifted up in love.

The Church's sorry history of judging, dividing and excluding reminds me of the image of low tide at the seashore. At low tide what's left are a lot of divided and stagnant pools of water. These pools have become stranded, isolated, and are often motionless. The incoming tide unites these stagnant pools and brings them back into the ocean. So also with the divisions within the church, and humankind in the wider world, as long stranded pools of human groupings are being washed back into the ocean of the unity and community of God, Adonai, Allah.ⁱⁱⁱ We find ourselves united with other pools often without any motion of our own—to our own surprise.^{iv} We are united both by God's unifying love and power, and by the divisive and engulfing destructive potential of our human ignorance and fear, hatred and violence. "Together we must learn to live as brothers [and sisters] or together we will be forced to perish as fools," is how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated it.^v Or as Shakespeare put it, "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted—all the voyage of their lives is bound in shallows."

Just as a small tidal pool doesn't last, God cannot be contained by any spiritual or religious monopoly or political party. No one can take possession of the Spirit of God. God is greater than any human group, any religious tradition or denomination, any party or ideology, any nation, any perspective. God rejects every pretension to monopolize the love and power and justice of which God is the source. Jesus, in our gospel today, is echoed both by Paul who proclaims to the Athenians, "God has made of one blood all the nations of the earth [Acts 17:26]," and by Peter: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God [Acts 10:34-35]."^{vi}

And as my professor and spiritual guide, Roland Walls, pointed out, "...one of the things Christ was doing in the gospels was to show the utter futility of all these labels on people, like Samaritan [or foreigner, unclean, outsider, or what have you]. He didn't label people. And this unlabeled existence, without any [admission] tickets for people as they come in, seems to me part of the gospel living. You discover the new humanity by being accepting of humanity, and not making partitions—and certainly not partitions within the Christian church—into a stumbling-block to acceptability."^{vii}

Some of the final verses in today's gospel text, which are put in exaggerated form, demand our wide embrace of others, and our total availability to God. Using the metaphor of the body, Jesus states that it is better to physically remove all that impedes the living out of the gospel, and to enter life in the Kingdom of God maimed, or lame, or with one eye, so to speak, than to "put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me." If taken literally, this passage would lead to a world full, and churches full, of one-eyed, one-handed, or one-footed people! So don't take them literally—not even the Fundamentalists take these literally. But do take them truthfully, these surgical metaphors. For being truly available to God, others, and to your true self, sometimes requires a letting go as painful as losing an eye or a limb: a letting go of your old grudges, discontents, and prejudices, a letting go of your prerogatives and privilege that keep you over and apart from others. And letting go—and thus becoming more available to Jesus' mission—may put you in a place where you will be seasoned and tempered and made

wiser. As Jesus put it, you will be “salted with fire.” As our gospel today insists, this journey of discovering the wideness of God’s mercy is a journey taken with others. It only works if we are not fragmented nor focused on our own self-promotion. As one commentator put it, “Within individual Christian communities, between churches, and between religions [—with all humanity and God’s creation—] our salvation is *interdependent*.”^{viii}

ⁱ This gospel reading is one of those that comes up in our lectionary once in a while, and it is a bit of a preacher’s nightmare, especially if we focus on the latter part. Even if we could explain that the statements about cutting off one’s own hand, or foot or eye, were metaphoric ways of saying that we need to look after our own shortcomings and faults and to become congruent in our thoughts, words and deed, rather than looking to judge others. For in so doing even through our thoughts and words; that would be equivalent to doing so in deed, thus causing havoc with the ethic of an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth and a foot for a foot which had been a way of punishing deeds proportionally. And if so applied to thoughts and words, as well as deeds, this would lead to a world, as Gandhi put it, which would just leave everyone blind and toothless and lame. Yet even such an explanation still seems inadequate.

And even if we could explain the statements about hell, where “the worm never dies,” and the fire is never quenched, as being statements lifted out of the book of Isaiah (66:14) and alluding to an actual physical site outside the walls of Jerusalem called Gehenna, where it was thought to be the actual site of hell, because children were once sacrificed to pagan gods there centuries before—and the site had since become the city dump where maggots would have squirmed and hot gasses escaped from the massive compost of garbage—and Jesus probably had walked with his disciples near there and it was a good location to refer to in doing some hard teaching about commitment. And Matthew the gospel writer would have also known about this site and heartily used these images. But all that also seems just a bit inadequate as an interpretation as well.

So, again I fall back on the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard who stated, “When you read God’s Word, it is not the obscure passages which impose a duty on you, but rather those which you do understand, and with that you must instantly comply. If there were only a single passage you did understand in Holy Scripture—well, the first thing to do is to do that; but you do not first have to sit down and puzzle over the obscure passages. God’s Word is given in order that you shall act in accordance with it, not in order that you shall practice the art of interpreting obscure passages” (Quoted in Thomas C. Oden, ed. Parables of Kierkegaard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978)). So with that in mind, I turn to the first part of our gospel today

ⁱⁱ This scene reminds me a little of a moment in racially divided Boston back in 1979. I was a youth minister at an Episcopal church in Boston’s South End. A tragic shooting of a black football player on a field by a couple of white snipers made for a very charged situation, to say the least. A number of us were involved in organizing some of the religious leadership in Boston and a meeting was held at the residence of Cardinal Madeiros. The meeting started with polite talk, and then it was Mel King’s turn to speak. Some of you will remember Mel King—he was as fiery, at times, as Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Anyway, Mel King, who had expelled many a demon of racism over many years, looked directly at the Cardinal and said, “You need a staff!” To which, immediately three men in clergy collars stood up and said, rather disdainfully, “We are his Eminence’s staff.” Well, that wasn’t quite what Mel King meant, so he replied again, directly to the Cardinal, “No, you need a staff—a *stick*—and you need to get out there with that stick and tell *your* people to stop shooting at *my* people.” In that moment of tension, the Cardinal smiled, motioned to his three staffers to sit down, and the conversation entered a whole new dimension of depth. “We are his Eminence’s staff.” That memory came back to me when I read these lessons for today.

ⁱⁱⁱ Today we face the tidal realities of the clash of cultures and religions, and destruction from armed conflict, terrorist violence, environmental degradation, and the further tearing of the fabric of urban and community life under severe economic and social stress. These and other realities have come back upon us with awesome force. On the one hand, in our lifetime, we have witnessed many divisions of nation, denomination, race and sexual orientation being dissolved.

^{iv} And yet, on the other hand, such divisive forces—not from God—are still being played out around the world and closer to home, and continue to divide the human family.

^v Martin Luther King, Jr. Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 171.

^{vi} As for our Christian family, Frederick Buechner states,

“There’s no reason why everyone should be Christian in the same way and every reason to leave room for differences; but if all the competing factions of Christendom were to give as much of themselves to the high calling and holy hope that unites them as they do now to the relative inconsequentialities that divide them, the Church would look more like the Kingdom of God for a change and less like an ungodly mess.” (Frederick Buechner Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized. San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1998, p. 35).

^{vii} Quoted in Ron Ferguson with Mark Chater, Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2006), pp. 103-104. Unfortunately, the parochialism and divisiveness in the Church these days is less and less a matter of loyalties and chauvinism *between* different historical denominations than it is a divisiveness that cuts deeply *within* and across each denomination, coming from quite different world views and cultural and political divides.

^{viii} Michaela Bruzzese, “Divided We Fall” in Sojourners (September-October 2009), p. 55.