

“Choosing Sides”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 27, 2009

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Acts 3:1-10

Mark 9:38-41

In Mark’s gospel, as Jesus continues his journey toward Jerusalem, he focuses squarely upon the twelve disciples: teaching them – despite their trouble understanding – what it means to follow his way. Yet, in these words, Jesus is also teaching us: people who walk with Christ, but are not sure where we are being led, not certain what it means to follow, wondering what it takes to be a true disciple of Jesus.

Within the New Testament, it seems like there is a range within the criteria of genuine discipleship: from showing ethical behavior in Matthew’s gospel, to making a true confession of faith in John; from works of service in James, to a willingness to bear the cross in Paul’s letters. Here, in Mark, Jesus offers another standard: one that has been called radical hospitality.¹

The precipitating situation is this: one of the disciples, John, reports that someone else has been driving out demons in the name of Jesus. Unlike the disciples, who had failed to be able to control demons, this individual is successful. Therefore, the members of the twelve, with John as their spokesman, seem threatened that someone else might be usurping their role, laying claim to the special position alongside Jesus that they enjoyed.

The disciples try to stop this renegade from doing his work because, as John says, he is “not one of us.” Something, whether innate or learned, causes the disciples to think in terms of “us” and “them.” Even during Jesus’ life, his followers have a sense of established boundaries: they make note of who is in and who is out.

Though Jesus has been teaching about inclusivity in his Father’s Kingdom, the disciples are still thinking competitively. “They are still drawing lines that exclude and inevitable create hurt and bitterness. In their complaint, they tell Jesus that this man was *not following us*.”² Us, have they forgotten who is the leader and who are the followers?

As history has often revealed, the problem with our established boundaries is that they become lines of division: walls are erected and guards are posted to limit entry and exit. Though this mysterious healer knows and invokes the name of Jesus, he is an outsider and the disciples do not see his name on the membership rolls. Therefore, they question his legitimacy: could he have ulterior motives? Was he using the name of Jesus for personal gain? Would he use these powers to lead people down the wrong path?

¹ Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, p. 426

² Mitzi Minor in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Sept. 2003

As we witness throughout the gospels, Jesus breaks down the walls that divide people. He teaches the disciples not to worry about labels of “us” and “them” but instead to think and act inclusively. Anyone who offers even a cup of water, Jesus tells them, should be welcomed and accepted. “Whoever is not against us is for us,” Jesus says. This way of thinking requires an acknowledgement of anyone who contributes for the good; it calls for radical hospitality.

Jesus also taught his disciples: “judge not lest you be judged as well.” He offered two parables to illustrate why – although we can choose to side with God, we do not get to choose who stands with us on God’s side. In the first, Jesus explains how the wheat and the tares are allowed to grow together, to be separated only after the harvest. As an amateur gardener, I know that I don’t always follow this advice, wanting my garden to look good and to give my plants the best chance to grow and produce. But, with people it is different; in scripture and in life we are given many examples of people who, though they seem like prime candidates for uprooting, turn out not be what we had expected.

The second parable is about the sheep and the goats. Even those of us who haven’t done a day of shepherding think we know them by their looks, but Jesus tells us that they will be separated by a completely different criteria. It is according to what they do – even in small acts in some faraway place, that their true colors will be revealed.

In modern society, especially considering the events of this decade, the risks of such an approach are great. No longer can we afford to give each and every individual the benefit of the doubt, risking a tragedy before taking action to prevent it. These days, everyone is – or at least is supposed to be – treated with equal suspicion and caution: all travelers subject to the same kind of searches; all people required to carry proper identification.

If, in the last eight years, the way that we engage strangers and protect our borders has changed so profoundly, what can we learn from two-thousand years ago – from the ancient world of Jesus – and apply to today’s society? Would Jesus endorse making everyone take their shoes off at airports; or support imprisoning indefinitely someone labeled a “material witness” if they might have information about terrorists?

Jesus says, “be at peace with one another.” Maybe, by these words, he refers to people such as the outsider that John and the other disciples want to discredit. Although this man is not a friend of the disciples, he at least labors in the name of Jesus and makes a positive impact.

Maybe Jesus also refers to all those other people who contribute to the work of God’s Kingdom – healing the sick, releasing those in bondage, feeding the hungry – those who, as Jesus says, bring a cup of water. Through their acts, if not also through their beliefs, they further the cause of goodness. Martin Luther King, Jr. admitted that he would have given up his pursuit of equality among the races and his principles of non-violence without the example of Gandhi to follow. On a smaller and more local level, many of us are aided in our Christian walk by the words and lives of non-Christians. The water they provide can also bring refreshment.

Given the conflict and violence taking place around the world, it is a tall order to, as Jesus says, “be at peace with one another.” Peace, in biblical terms, refers not just to a cessation of violence, but a shared vision of mutuality and respect. Some Christians claim that the best and most faithful response to conflict in the world is pacifism. In their interpretation, peace among individuals and nations is the highest ideal, above even the pursuit of justice and equality. For a pacifist, the use of violence is strictly prohibited, except in a dire, defensive situation. The commitment to peace is exhibited by choosing not to fight.

Seventy years ago, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr saw the presence of evil and terrorism in the world, although not – like today – in covert hate groups, but in the very public leaders of the nations of Germany, Italy and Japan. As a Christian and an American, Niebuhr struggled with the biblical merits of pacifism, and the ideal of peace at all costs, versus advocating American military involvement in international affairs.

Niebuhr finally concluded that because all of us are sinners – on individual as well as national levels – all of us must participate in a system of balanced power. Countries, whether as aggressors or as pacifists, each exert some form of power. Therefore, he concluded, peace – in accordance with the biblical criteria or mutuality and justice – might sometimes be best attained through the use of military force, and conflict in the short-term may ultimately bring about peace in the long-term.³

There is a place outside of Jerusalem known as *Gehenna*. Long ago, it was the site of many human and animal sacrifices. Because of its tarnished reputation, it later served as a trash heap. It was known as a place where the fire never went out and the worms never went hungry. Over time, the word *gehenna* came to mean any place of filth and stench, of hopelessness and pain, it came to represent a hell on earth.

There are places in our world today that seem pretty hellish. Like neighborhoods where drugs, crime and poverty reign; or nations where preventable and curable diseases go untreated; or segments of society where physical and emotional abuse go unchallenged. Most of all, nations ravaged by war resemble *gehenna*. These are hellish places because of the hellish realities that define them: a failure to love each other, accept differences, or help strangers; building walls and rejoicing when certain people have been kept out.

But, in each of those places, in every corner of the world, there are Christians present; working to change the negative into positive, striving to create a more just and peaceful world. Not Christians exclusively, but predominantly. They are an extension of us, peacemakers on the front lines, representing many other peace-lovers who support them and pray for them from behind the lines.

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice*, p. 300

Christians around the world are bringing a cup of water. In many ways, both large and small, we seek justice, and usually by peaceful means. We strive to tear down the dividing walls and bring about God's vision of both peace and justice. As long as we do this, no place on earth is fated to forever be *gehenna*, hell on earth. Still, we wonder, how can we be at peace with one another when we are despised by some for who we are or where we come from or what we believe? How can we tear down the walls that divide when terrorists are waiting to march in right behind the wrecking ball?

God only knows. And that is okay because God also knows that we, as disciples, have an enormous capacity to impact others as we seek to be examples of peace and justice in this and every part of the world. God willing, we can bring our cup of water, and with God, create a greater peace in this time, and in this place, and in the days to come. AMEN.