

Pentecost 21B - 9/27/09
St. David's

It is at the heart of the greatest battles in the history of humanity. Countries go to war over it. Religions split in half because of it. Bloody Crusades were fought over it. Thousands were killed in Civil Wars due to it. The war to end all wars was waged because of it. The 4000 year old struggle in the Middle East is based on it. It is the root cause of all the *-isms* we have created to hurt one another. Racism, classism, sexism, elitism. It, all by itself, has created the most hateful communities this has ever known, the Ku Klux Klan, the neo-Nazis, the skinheads. It is the rationale behind terrorists blowing up the World Trade Center and attempting to kill as many people as possible. It is, in fact, the reason there are terrorists organizations. It is the major factor behind the battle going on in religion today over homosexuality. It is the force behind every church fight I have ever seen. It is the impetus for a Pastor in Tempe, Arizona to preach a sermon entitled "Why I Hate Barack Obama, saying among other things that "he hopes God strikes President Obama with brain cancer so he can die like Ted Kennedy." It is also the fuel for this same Pastor suggesting that all gay people are predators and should get the death penalty and then go on to say that adulterers should be stoned. The most vindictive, vicious actions ever perpetrated on one human being by another were done in the name of it. It is what puts animosity and hatred in our own hearts and makes each of us do things we will later regret.

It all begins with one little sentence, the sentence that we just saw that even Disney writers identify as doing so much damage to the world.

The sentence that initiates all of this hate? “He is not one of us.” That is how all of us start when we want to justify distancing ourselves from each other. Distancing then leads to disrespect, which often leads to segregation of that person, which then leads to demonizing of them, and then dehumanizing of them. And once we dehumanize another, we can justify doing virtually anything to them.

Though it is not easy to recognize at first glance, that is what is going on in today’s rather convoluted Gospel. It is unfortunate that Mark’s words today are so cryptic and difficult to follow, because his underlying message is one all of us desperately need to hear. Beneath the chopping off of body parts and the obscure metaphor about salt, Jesus’s original message is as valuable and important to humanity as anything we will ever hear.

Today, it is the disciple John who goes down the dangerous “he is not one of us” path. In this case, we learn of an exorcist who is providing the much needed first century service of expelling demons from an individual. John, speaking for all the disciples, is perturbed because this guy is, as he says, “not following us.” Note that he does not say to Jesus, we tried to stop him because “he is not following you”, but rather he says, because “he is not one of us.”

It might be helpful at this juncture to remember that earlier in this same chapter, the disciples had their own experience with demon expelling, and they did not do so well. They failed to heal the individual in need. Now, here is this guy, who has not done all of the hard work they have, who has not been with and heard Jesus preach every sermon, who has not gone before the Commission on Ministry, who does not

even go to church, who may not even understand or agree with Jesus's theology, but who has apparently successfully removed a demon anyway. How is this fair? How can this be? How can Jesus let someone invoke his name who is not part of their elite group, who is not one of them?

What the disciples decide to do about this, is what we all do. Threatened by someone outside their group, they choose to exclude by suggesting that he is not one of them. To protect themselves, to insure their own status within the group, to make sure that someone else does not take their place in the hierarchy, they make new rules, new membership rules to get in the organization. "This guy can't take part in what we are doing", they say, "because he is not like us, he didn't do all we did to be in the club, in the church, in the select group of Jesus people."

This moment in Biblical history is a profoundly important one, because Jesus and the disciples are contrasting two very different understandings of the faith journey. It will be the choice between these two approaches to faith that will dominate religious difference over the next two thousand years.

Jesus responds as he always does throughout the Gospels, suggesting that faith is all about doing. He chastises the disciples point of view, telling them that he doesn't care how someone is providing food and drink to those in need, or who is removing the evil from someone's life. He does not care if someone invokes his name even if they disagree with his belief system, as long as they are working to heal other people. That's because for Jesus, faith is centered in action, action that brings healing to others. It is all about what each of us do to care for the other. Jesus tells the

disciples and us that we are all to be exorcists, that we are all called to work to remove evil from the world, whether we are religious or not.

But today, the disciples offer a different vision of faith. By suggesting that this exorcist must be one of them if he wants to continue exorcising demons, by making a new rule that he must be a member of the group first, they are introducing a radically different vision of faith, of what it means to be religious. What they are saying, albeit inadvertently, is that religion is first about following. "He needs to follow us first", they say. Taking the disciples response that he is not one of us to its ultimate conclusion, the purpose of religion changes. With this formula, membership in the church becomes more important than service to others. In other words, faith becomes about belief rather than action.

That is the choice Christians have had to make ever since. For the first 300 years or so, it was the Jesus vision that usually won. Faith was all about being deacons to one another, about caring for the widow and all those in need. There were hundreds of different theologies and beliefs about Christ and God during that time. But no one cared much about how you interpreted God, because faith was all about caring for and serving others, as Jesus taught.

But the day that the emperor Constantine became a Christian and decided that Rome would become a Christian nation, Christianity turned towards the disciples vision in today's Gospel. The Emperor locked the Bishops in a room and would not let them out until they had defined orthodoxy, until they stated what all must believe to be a true Christian. Christianity suddenly moved after the council of Nicea from being about

service to being about membership. Right action was trumped by right belief. After that, if you did not agree with the church's official stance on any subject, then you were "not like us." And if you were not like us, you were removed from the church. It was during this time that the first Christians were killed for theological disagreement with what had been deemed orthodox belief. As we are all painfully aware, this new belief-centered form of Christianity would lead to a religious hierarchy that gave people litmus tests to determine if they were really Christian. The word "heretic" would become commonplace to describe those with a different understanding of God.

Now some will argue that if had not been for this shift, if Christianity had not become belief centered, the whole tradition would in all likelihood disappeared as a footnote in history. But it is also true that belief-centered Christianity led to the inquisition, the Crusades and burnings at the stake.

Is it no wonder then, that Jesus responds today with such graphic metaphors, when describing how important it is that we avoid "he is not one of us" theology. I would argue that history suggests that it would have been better if we had tied millstones around our necks than create a church structure based on right belief rather than right action.

Whenever we suggest in whatever form that we have a corner on Jesus, that we have it right and someone else has it wrong, we have fallen into the same sanctimonious trap. Whenever our religion suggests to us that we alone hold the truth, that we hold the keys to the kingdom, then that religion holds the potential of becoming evil. It can become just as evil and just as life killing as any corrupt government or

regime, and it has. Whenever any of us draws lines between our beliefs and others, whenever we try to separate others from us for whatever reason, whenever we suggest that we know the right way, remember where Jesus will be standing. He will always be on the other side of our line, standing with those people we have tried to separate. If there is anything more clear in the Gospels I have not yet found it. Jesus is always with the outsiders. The only way therefore, for us to stand with Jesus is for us to never draw lines of separation, to never ever say, “she is not one of us.”

Of course, Christians do not hold a patent on “she is not one of us” thinking and the self-righteousness that follows.. I was reminded of this during the week when I saw the blog of one Rob Sherman. He calls his site “Godless in Chicago.” Responding to the escapades of South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford, Sherman said this; “We in the atheist community have a saying: ‘Thank God, he’s not one of us!’”

It is counter-intuitive, but apparently even atheists can be sanctimonious, and strut a holier than thou attitude about their atheism. Atheist or agnostic, Christian or Buddhist, the issue for all of us is the same. Once we define others as different from ourselves, once we put a fence around who we are, we have created a world of insiders and outsiders, and we open ourselves to believing that we are better than everyone else. As Jesus puts it today, we lose our salt, we lose our flavor. We become so perfectly wonderful and so perfectly annoying, that everyone just wants to run away from us.

Instead, Jesus teaches us today that everyone must be one with us. He tells us that we must stop putting up obstacles for others. Grace, he reminds us, is supposed

to be free, but we keep telling people they have to believe a certain way or behave a certain way to get it. How exactly, did we get to take that job away from God?

In today's pluralistic world, putting an end, once and for all, to "he is not one of us" theology, is even more important than it was before. We simply will not survive if we do not. But even more than that, we have a great opportunity never available to those who came before us. We have the chance to sit next to Buddhists, to talk openly with Muslims, to have discussions with Hindus. I had one such discussion just last week right here in Page. All of those moments offer us huge opportunities to expand our faith, to learn more about how others have experienced God. What those conversations invariably do is strengthen our own faith. But that only occurs if we can stop falling into the, "he is not one of us" trap.

The time has come for us to take back the pre-Constantinian church. It is time for us once again to make doing more important than following, to make service to others more important than membership, to stop being so obsessed with right belief and return to being laser focused on right action.

Today, Jesus calls us to reclaim this understanding of church, by asking all of us to be exorcists. In the past, we have exorcised the wrong thing, removing people from our churches because of unorthodox belief and because they were not one of us. But the demonic forces Jesus actually asked us to remove are prejudice and exclusivism. Whether we have been saturated in this tradition our entire lives, or this is our first day here, we are called to exorcise from our midst anything that may divide us, anything that separates anyone from the love of God.

This, of course, will not be easy as long as we continue to live in a “she is not one of us” world. But if we follow the lead of today’s heroes and heroines, we too can start changing that culture. Queen Esther, in today’s first reading, saves her fellow Hebrews through cunning and trickery in a very secular world without ever once invoking God’s name. In fact, God appears nowhere in the entire book of Esther. But she, like the exorcist in today’s Gospel, was still successful in protecting her people from the demons of the Persian empire. And of course Jesus spent his entire career as an exorcist, removing the exclusive rules of Judaism and Rome to create a more inclusive world. At the time, both were seen as heretics, not one of us. Only in the light of later history were they seen as liberators.

The same can be said down through the ages, about many who chose to reject the disciples notion today of a church where following took precedence over doing. Galileo, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, Matthew Fox, all of them exorcists of one sort or another, and all thrown out of the church and labeled as heretics.

May all of us have the courage to be called heretics, until we have reclaimed Jesus’s church, until we have re-created the church of right action over the church of right belief. May we never be satisfied until exorcising someone over theological orthodoxy is only a part of our ancient history. Let us reclaim the church of Jesus, where never again does anyone utter the phrase, “he is not one of us.” Amen.

