
THAT WHICH UNITES US

I have a confession to make: most of the time, I don't really care for the preachers I see on television.

- I find that they don't say things the way I like to hear them.
- I don't think they're right because they seem to understand the Bible differently from the way I read it.
- And they don't seem to be the kind of Christians and preachers I think they ought to be.
 - Because they don't fit my vision of Christianity, I begin to wonder if they are even Christian at all.

That's the whole problem: these TV evangelists don't belong to our group, so they must be wrong and really need to stop.

- They're not sharing the message we share in the way we share it.

"TEACHER, we saw someone driving out demons in YOUR name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

- Let's take a moment to think about that.
- The disciples encountered someone "driving out demons" in JESUS' name.
 - That is, they came across someone relieving intense misery, following JESUS' example (HIS first act of power in Mark's gospel was to cast out a demon), and is doing so in JESUS' name.

But none of that is enough because he was not one of them.

- Notice the shift in pronouns.
- These exorcisms are done in "YOUR name," but he was "one of us."
 - Apparently, it is not enough to be a follower of JESUS; you have to be a certain kind of follower,
 - one who fits into their expectation, who shares their theological understanding, perhaps even over whom the disciples can exert some control.

It's interesting that John, the disciple giving this report, seems to expect JESUS' approval.

- He isn't asking, "Should we have stopped him?"
- Rather, he proudly states what they did: "We told him to stop because he was not one of us."
 - They're ratting out this guy for doing what JESUS had told them to do,
 - but because he isn't part of *their* group, they told him to stop doing, again, what JESUS had told them to do.

Rather than approving, though, JESUS corrects John and the others: *"Do not stop him, for no one who does a miracle in MY name can in the next moment say anything bad about ME, for whoever is not against us is for us."*

- The key to what JESUS is saying is those words, "in MY name."
- In a sense, JESUS is telling them, "That which unites us is greater than that which divides us."

I find it fascinating that the writers of the New Testament don't hold back on including moments of confusion and conflict in the early church.

- There are times when they, like we, get a bit mixed up, miss the point, and end up working against rather than for the Kingdom of GOD.
- And by including this here, Mark invites us to reframe how we think about our lives, our commitments, our identities, and our visions of what makes up an authentic Christian community,
 - perhaps to the point of suggesting that even televangelists are doing the work of the LORD.

And it's particularly challenging for us to read this passage in light of the clear polarization of our time:

- Things don't seem so different from what they were back then.
- It takes only a momentary glance to notice that even the Church has not escaped these divisions.
 - Rather, it has allowed itself to be defined almost entirely by the terms of the political climate.
 - Christian leaders on the left and the right (and even here, we can't seem to avoid labels from the political context) set the standards of who's in and who's out and what constitutes true faith: "You can't be a Christian if you (and you can fill in the blanks):"
 - voted for Donald Trump."
 - voted against Donald Trump."
 - are pro-choice."
 - are pro-life."
 - aren't LGBTQ-friendly."
 - advocate for LGBTQ rights."
 - and the list continues.
- We seem more comfortable deciding what is wrong with someone else based on what we believe is right about ourselves.
 - But we forget: that which unites us is greater than that which divides us.

It doesn't take long to realize that both sides—and too often, we can only think in terms of either/or—that both sides are mirrors of each other.

- Not in terms of our convictions but by how we allow our convictions to be the basis for determining whether or not another person can bear the name of CHRIST.
 - In other words, both sides of whatever the issue is could easily say, "And we tried to stop them because they were not one of us."
- Yet, as a church, we believe that we faithfully sing the words of Marty Haugen's beloved hymn, #641, in our hymnal: "All are welcome, all are welcome...unless you disagree with us."
 - Actually, the verse of that hymn ends, "all are welcome in this place,"
 - but too often, we seem to lean for the other version.

Let me be both careful and precise at this point.

- I am not advocating for an a-political version of Christianity where we all believe exactly the same thing.
- GOD cares about our politics.
 - In fact, the root of the word "politics" is the Greek word "polis" meaning "people."
 - It is vitally important that we affirm Martin Luther's conviction that GOD is at work in our politics and governmental structures to care for GOD'S people.
 - GOD wants us to be active in politics, campaigning, and voting to support the values we believe best represent GOD's Kingdom.

- But if not an a-political church, perhaps we can work toward one that is at least non-partisan.
 - That is, perhaps we can imagine that GOD is at work in and through someone who bears the name of CHRIST but who disagrees with us profoundly on an issue that is important to us.
 - Might we make room in our worship and fellowship for those who disagree with us without labeling them?
 - Can we stop, at least for a moment, trying to convince someone else of why they are wrong, or worse, condemning them because they believe differently than we do?
 - Could we instead try to understand what experiences have shaped their views while sharing our own?
 - Can we imagine that good ideas may come from those with different perspectives?
 - Can we recognize their commitment to our LORD and wholeheartedly say, “That which unites us is greater than that which divides us?”

Even as I prepare this sermon, I recognize that there are some significant issues on the table, and to back away from them risks the rights and safety of others.

- I absolutely am not advocating surrendering one’s convictions.
- Instead, I encourage us to try to know, understand, and even respect those with whom we disagree.
 - More than that, I am calling upon us to recognize the faith others have in our LORD joyfully,
 - How wonderful to be surrounded by others who believe that JESUS the CHRIST is our LORD and SAVIOR.
 - How exciting it can be to hear someone tell of their love for JESUS.

Perhaps I’m inviting, in light of JESUS’ words today, to HIS first disciples and to us, to change the ending to this scene:

- “TEACHER, we saw someone (fill in the blank):
 - casting out demons,
 - working for justice,
 - advocating for those who have lost their jobs or feel left behind,
 - caring for veterans,
 - protesting injustice,
 - (and there are many more ways to complete this) all in YOUR name.
- “TEACHER, we saw them and though they do not belong to our group, in fact, though we disagree with them, we did not try to stop them.
 - “Instead, we prayed for them, praised them, and looked for ways to support them.
- “TEACHER, we did this because they were doing this in YOUR name, and YOU, LORD, have helped us to understand that that which unites us—YOU, LORD—are greater than anything that might divide us.”