

Proper 21B
Mark 9:38-50
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Real People: living into tolerance, hope and service

It's been a different kind week, with all the news of Pope Francis' visit. I'm fascinated by the Pope, his obvious dedication to Jesus, his commitment to the poor and vulnerable, his willingness to speak out for the common good. I truly enjoyed listening to his address to Congress and was particularly moved by his references to our nation's history and the four Americans who worked in their own ways to help build a better future: Abraham Lincoln, who strove for liberty, Martin Luther King Jr, who was dedicated to plurality, Dorothy Day, who labored tirelessly for social justice and raising people out of extreme poverty; and Thomas Merton, who challenged the certitudes of his time through dialogue and an openness to God. While we're familiar with Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr, perhaps Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton are not as commonly known.

Both Day and Merton were converts to Catholicism. Dorothy Day (a former Episcopalian) lived out her life with people at the margins. She founded the Catholic Worker movement, supporting labor unions and creating soup kitchens for the poor. She was a profoundly dedicated social justice activist in the post-depression era and was known as an ardent pacifist.

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk, and a passionate advocate for dialogue, social justice, and peace. He was a best-selling author (unusual for a monastic) and a very publicly visible Christian contemplative. He lived our the post-World War II world and would later actively participate in anti-Vietnam war protests. He was a man of dialogue, a student of comparative religion who actively explored Eastern spirituality, and was a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.

Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. Real people, complex people, who confronted the problems of their times, who acted and strived for a better future. Real people who lived their lives in hope.

In today's gospel, Mark continues to provide us a snapshot, a view of Jesus' followers, and these too, are very real people. No one is particularly holy, nor particularly smart or intuitive. No one seems to have singularly exemplary gifts. They are simply ordinary people, with their own strengths and weaknesses, their own peculiarities and perspectives. Regular people, like you and me.

You may remember that last week we heard that these real people argued about who is the greatest and when their petty argument was discovered, they were silent and embarrassed. Jesus told them to set aside their human sense of values, and see greatness differently, through service and reordered priorities. Jesus taught them about a new kind of radical hospitality towards all,

even those typically held in low esteem, such as children. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the one who sent me.”

Today’s lesson is a continuation of last week’s and we hear John’s concerns that a stranger was successfully casting out demons in Jesus’ name. But since he was not a follower of the disciples, they tried to stop him. John seems concerned that someone else may have an “in” to Jesus and Jesus’ power. This stranger may somehow be usurping authority belonging to the disciples, without having to be one of the disciples. Why was John worried about some non-disciple having authority? Was there a concern about the competition? To me, it sounds like a different verse, but a similar refrain, to the disciples arguing over who is the greatest.

These real people still have so much to learn about discipleship, for here they are trying to exclude someone from spreading Jesus’ healing power, simply because this man was not following them. But Jesus tells the disciples not to stop the stranger, for following Jesus is not about creating some exclusive inner circle. Deeds of power are from Jesus alone and his power cannot be suppressed.

Instead Jesus urges graciousness, generosity, and acceptance. Here we see an emphasis on tolerance and being at peace with one another. “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

The disciples have had two back-to-back teachings to help them see that Jesus is reversing the cultural values, turning upside-down the social norms. “Even those who give a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” Jesus brings new life and light, openness and acceptance, and his love will not be contained.

It’s hard to change, but we can be transformed in the Spirit. With God’s help, we can step away from pettiness and instead become willing to welcome others, to reject exclusivity and power and instead live into inclusiveness.

We live into discipleship by opening ourselves to Jesus’ idea of greatness: greatness that is displayed through tolerance, welcoming, and openness.

Can you imagine how conversations and attitudes about tough topics like racism, immigration, and caring for the poor could change, if held within the light of Jesus’ teachings of inclusion? And how following Jesus could help us to open ourselves to embrace change and new possibilities, without fear?

At a recent ministerial meeting we had a discussion about our County’s real need for low-income housing. When the time comes for solutions to be put in place, will we be open to locations that could be close to our own homes? Will we be welcoming, or instead fall into the classic NIMBY rhetoric...not-in-my-backyard.

It's hard to live into Jesus' instructions to be at peace with one another, to intentionally strive for tolerance and inclusivity. It's easy to be open and welcoming towards those who look like us, act like us, and live like us, but stretching ourselves to reach out to others, to seek justice and live in solidarity with those who are different, is hard.

In two weeks we will have a ministry fair that will include information about ways that we, as the Holy Spirit community, can participate in reaching out to others:

- You can find out about outreach opportunities including new efforts by the men's group and our youth to support Family Promise, a new ecumenical ministry in Forsyth County that hopes to deal with homelessness by providing resources and assistance for the over 700 homeless children in our county.
- You can learn about how you can help in upcoming Youth efforts to feed the hungry at our Annual Council retreat, or about our youth mission trips to Honduras, Birmingham, and Atlanta — all efforts that involve reordering priorities, openness to understanding the needs of others, and living into radical hospitality.
- You can find out about our multiple outreach ministries, including Mentor Me, Backpacks of Love, In Stitches, our prison ministry, the Pantry, and how we support the Church of the Common Ground.

And you'll also discover ways we can support and nourish one another within our faith community, strengthening each other for our work in the world.

We are called to stretch ourselves beyond what is comfortable, to serve others in Christ's name, to spread God's great light of hope. This week, Pope Francis has reminded us that we can and should come together to address the issues of our times, to work towards the common good, and to care for the most vulnerable. In the Pope's words, I hear another way of expressing today's gospel message: to have salt in ourselves, and be at peace with one another. With God's help, we can work together, to bring Christ's light and life to the world.