

September 30, 2018

St Mark 9: 38 - 50

Whitsuntide Nineteen

The first three hundred years of Christianity has long been called the Primitive Church, and the most important feature of it was its complete chaos and confusion. There were more questions than answers, and once the answers came, it led to more questions and debates. No one could agree on anything, other than that Jesus was the Son of God who had sacrificed His so that those who believed in Him and professed His name might have eternal salvation. Suffice it to note that today's practice of our faith, and even many of our beliefs, are very different from 1700 years ago.

Today we have four authorized gospels, but during that era there were literally hundreds of them, and some of them far-fetched. There were different liturgies and practices of Holy Communion and Baptism, and there were disagreements about who was allowed to become a member. More importantly, here were many different interpretations about the nature of Jesus. Was he such a good man that God adopted him as his son? Was he all human? All spirit? Was he a hybrid between the two? What do we do with Mary his Mother?

The list goes on, but suffice it to note, that everything was subject to debate, argument, and sometimes violent disagreement.

Even before our Lord's Resurrection, we see this happening in this morning's Gospel lesson. John had seen some people other than the disciples praying over the sick and as St Mark records it, casting out demons in the Lord's name. He didn't like it, and it appears to me that he was getting a bit territorial. They're encroaching on something that belongs to us. Jesus - you need get over there and make them stop. Right now, before they create big problems for us - for you!

Jesus refused, explaining that when someone was working on his side, even if they were doing things differently, it could be a good thing. Don't allow your ego to become a stumbling block to their spiritual growth.

It is a challenge we face today. Let's begin with the one thing we all share in common. Whether we are cradle Episcopalians or came here from another denomination, we chose to come and to stay. We did it for a wide variety of reasons. I became an Episcopalian because of the solemnity of the liturgy and the ethos and traditions of the church. Perhaps that is your story, too. Others of you are here because of the warmth and love of others, a chance to study and grow without constantly worrying whether someone might call you a heretic or roll their eyes. You love and treasure the openness and tolerance of different ideas and diversity. Perhaps it is for that large umbrella of hospitality. Maybe it was something else.

I think we would all agree that these are very good, wonderful reasons, and they are positive. Yet at the same time, we know and understand that not everyone shares our joy in our worship and traditions. Some want more excitement such as a praise band, or want the hymns printed on a drop down screen. During December they can't quite figure out why we aren't singing Christmas carols in Advent, and even when we explain it, they still think we're a bit weird - too weird for them. We don't have sufficient zeal and fervour for them. For others, we are too tolerant.

But then, from time to time there are individuals, and I truly believe they are well-meaning even if they are wrong, who become angry and demanding because something isn't being done the *Right* way. That usually means something isn't being done *their* way, or the way they believe it should be done. Often, it comes with a vibrant tone of judgement in their voice.

That was John's attitude that day. Those outsiders, those interlopers, they have to be stopped and forbidden from working miracles. They're not one of us. They can't be doing it right.

When our parish was completed, a writer to the Commercial Record hid behind the bunker of anonymity and claimed that those Episcopalians weren't genuine Christians because they hid behind coloured glass and read prayers out of a book. Obviously, we were too similar to the Roman Catholics and not sufficiently Protestant to satisfy that individual. Because we were not living up to this individual's standards, they wrote a snappish letter and accusations.

It can happen in Sunday school classes or meetings, or at church activities when one individual not only disagrees with the ideas of another person, but dismisses them without considering them. Or the rolling of eyes when someone makes a suggestion or asks a question that is seemingly superficial or heading off into a wrong direction.

A college classmate once observed that you can tell when the demons are circling around like vultures because they are the ones who always want to re-arrange everything to suit their desires.

It doesn't stop with the spiritual side of life. Imagine that you just bought a new outfit and wore it to church, only to have someone say, "Well, I hope you didn't pay too much for that." Or a new car, or you told someone you were going somewhere on a vacation, and they responded with a cutting and hurtful remark. Not only it is deflating and hurtful, but it leaves you wondering if this is a church, if these are people, where you really want to be a member.

John made his case and Jesus pulled a child up to him to use as an illustration. John, you see this child. Be very careful you don't become a stumbling block to this boy or girl by your attitudes and critical words.

Perhaps as a child you were taught to fold your hands, close your eyes, and bow your head before you began to pray. It was a symbol of your submission to Almighty God. But then, perhaps decades later, you saw a child praying, and they didn't have their hands folded, their eyes closed, and their head down. Can you even imagine the harm you could potentially do by telling them they were doing it wrong, and God wouldn't hear or answer their prayers? Or, a child or another adult asks a question, and your first response is, "That is a really dumb thing to say."

Think back to your early years when, just as you felt there was a whole, wide, wonderful world to explore, someone instantly deflated you. Someone told you that you can't sing, and even if you never had a shot at Carnegie Hall, their words stopped you from ever learning. You'll never be any good at math, at science, at art, sports and athletics. I'll never forget the time my dad's friend Whitey laughed as he said, "Too bad you're not good looking like your father. You got a face made for radio." Even though it is true, it was unnecessarily painful. That stayed with me for years, and it wasn't until much later that I could make a joke of it and reply, "I know - and I'm pretty good behind the microphone, too."

With so little effort on their part, anyone can become a huge stumbling block for you, and they spoiled a lot of fun or maybe your future career with just a few sharp hurtful words. The hideous thing, is that with very little effort, we can say a few words that hurt beyond words.

When Jesus held that child He was demonstrating to John and anyone else present that day, and to all of us - this child is precious to God. All life is precious to God. Everyone is precious to God. Period. Got that? Good.

We are not expected to fix every problem, right every wrong, make everything in another person's life perfect. Rather simply be present - and I mean truly present, focused on them - with them, accept them, and love them as Jesus did. For someone who is in pain, your presence is the greatest, most loving gift imaginable. We can never forget that.

I began by pointing out that the early Christian Church was chaotic and in confusion. That hasn't changed, because we still live in that dynamic tension of confusion. I think it is a good thing - a very good thing. And I say that even though confusion and chaos are a true challenge. However, when we approach this with an open mind, curiosity, a willingness to think, feel, and explore, new possibilities begin to open up before us. It takes consideration of others and tolerance.

An idea, a new phrase, a re-arrangement of words or perspective just might open up opportunities for new spiritual growth. It leads to those delightful ah-ha epiphany moments, and sometimes it leads us to say that we're glad we thought about it and tried it, but no, it just isn't right.

The only things that are truly important is that we do not become a stumbling block to others because of our attitudes and agenda, and are open to whatever it might be God is showing us.