

Proper 21 2006
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
James 4:12-5:13
Mark 9:38-50

The series of 8 sayings read in Mark's Gospel today has little to hold them together. There is the dispute about who is in and who out according to the perspective of the disciples. It almost sounds like they are asking Jesus to affirm their insider status. After all the disciples have tried and failed to cast out demons while the stranger seems to have done the work in the name of Jesus but does not follow "them." He is not one of us and yet he has done a godly work/deed.

I can't help but think about all the heresy debates across the centuries, and the ongoing debate now about who is right and who is wrong about interpretation of scripture, conduct becoming a minister in the church, the position of those whose manner of life does not concur with our conceptions of the proper Christian. If we go down that road we are likely to find a fairly thorny path. I suspect that if we begin by saying some things are characteristic of belonging while other characteristics are proof of not being part of the Christian body, then we are really saying that no sin of any kind can be tolerated in the church. If we go there, we will find the place empty and ourselves unwilling to come to church because if we are even mildly honest we will admit that we are sinners. We may repent, be sorry, try to make amends, but no sooner do we get one wrong right than another situation arises in which we find ourselves imperfect.

Recently, one of my students missed class. Later in the day I got an email from her explaining that a friend's son had killed himself and she had been called out in the early hours of the morning to be with the mother while the body was being removed from the home. I saw her on Thursday and she told me more about the case. The adult son had a mental illness and was on medication and in psychological counseling. The mother thought he was doing better, but evidently he was not. The friend (my student) is simply trying to be fully present for the mother, to help her cope with the family reaction, the reaction of friends, arrange the funeral, and walk day by day and hour by hour with her as she deals with her grief. Some members of the family are angry, but the mother says, the disease killed him. I agree with her and think that this is a healthy attitude for her because suicide is always hard on the survivors. We may think that we can heal such a case by prayer and the divine intervention of God; we might even think that medicine can heal the disease whether the physician is a believer or not; and we might think that the person so haunted by the demons of this horrible disease is finally released from the torment and has received the ultimate healing. I am suggesting that all three of these are reasonable faith responses to the situation and none of the options are better or best, rather each reaches out to see the presence of God in the event. God ought to be bigger than our preconceived notions. We will find a lot more comfort and community when we allow God to act in diverse ways to reach beyond our grasp or understanding.

The sayings about welcoming a child in my name (v37), casting out demons in your name (v38), doing a deed of power in my name (v 39) and giving a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ (v41) point to intention and motives underscoring what we do. If my student went to be with a friend to give comfort, companionship, and compassion, is her gift good without her doing it in the name of Christ? Can any act of love and compassion be done without reflecting God in some way? Is there any other source of love than God? What makes an act good? One answer is the intent behind the action. Others may say that what happens, the

consequences of an action, is what makes the act good or bad. This is a rather heavy philosophical question and deserves prayerful reflection.

Many years ago the 13 year old son of my secretary was playing in a barn with some leather straps, jumping from the loft and swinging on the leather. One of the straps came loose, caught the boy by the neck and broke his neck. He did not die immediately, but was transported to John Hopkins Hospital where he remained on life support for about three days. The mother, single, struggled to accept the fact that he was not going to recover, that the ventilator was keeping the body “alive” but the brain was gone, and he could never return to a life of any quality. When I visited, I asked her if he was baptized, she cried all the harder as she told me that he was refused baptism by the priest because he was born out of wedlock. I simply took water and baptized her son. When the machines were removed and the funeral was planned, it was important to find someone who would not be judgmental and who could speak about God in a very ecumenical way. A friend who supervised the camp at Claggett was a priest with a very gentle spirit and accepting manner. Our lab had people from many different faith traditions and many people who self-identified as atheists. Not a single person regardless of their “belief” failed to visit the mother, attend the funeral, or offer support to her in the weeks that followed. Can we love and do acts of mercy without claiming a faith motive? I want to suggest that we are capable of love, compassion, and caring for one another simply because we are made in the image of God who is triune. God as Father, Son, and Spirit to the Christian is a relational Trinity. God is also love. Therefore, wherever love is, God is present, whether or not God is named or believed in a certain way. I think God is big enough to see that a cup of water given in order to simply help another person is an act of kindness, of love, of friendship, and honors the gift.

There is a powerful scene in the Narnia Chronicles in the final book, “The Last Battle.” The followers of Tash and the followers of Aslan come to a final battle between the forces of good and evil. As individuals die in the fight, the bodies are thrown into the shed, a dark place, but once inside there is an opening on the distant end. Through that opening one can enter into the world of Aslan. The hills are green, the sky is blue, and the great Aslan greets each one who enters. Some confess that they have not lived as well as they should have, done things they are sorry for, and Aslan is gracious and forgiving, welcoming each one who enters. One of the leaders of Tash enters and comes before Aslan, who welcomes him, but the man is sure that Aslan is mistaken, and confesses that he followed Tash all his life. Aslan, replies, what you did good, I count for me, all that was evil, I count for Tash. You are welcome here if you want to stay. The scene is one of humbling grace. You realize reading it that none of us will come before God with a perfect score in life, nor will we see perfect love face to face and not know the truth of our sins. God, as the Christ figure, Aslan shows us in this tale, is full of grace, forgiving, and loving.

The ending of the Markan account today is a harsh passage in which Jesus tells us to cut off an offending part of our body as if getting rid of a hand or foot would erase sin in our lives. I think Jesus was using the rhetorical art of hyperbole. It is quite clear that harming any person, self or other, was inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus. The beatitudes elicit blessings for the poor, the peacemakers, the seeker of wisdom and righteousness. To gain a clear understanding of what Jesus intended the audience to understand from these harsh remarks, requires that we look at the whole tenor of his life and ministry. Jesus would die a horrific death rather than be unfaithful to the will of the Father. Let me suggest a thought experiment for you.

Rather than blame a hand or foot for our sins, spend some time in a quiet place and think carefully about who you are, what you believe about God, and allow the grace of God to heal the

doubts, inspire your repentance, assure you that you are forgiven, and then drink in the power of God's love that allows us to get up day in and day out and go about the work God gives us to do. Rather than judge someone else as unworthy, see him or her as individuals' precious to God. All of us are sinners. All of us are loved beyond our imaginations. If we can accept God's forgiveness and grace and love imperfect as we are, then we can allow God to love others also.

We may want our salvation free and easy and resent it when someone in our faith community suggests that we ought to do x, or not do y, or give more money, or have a particular political viewpoint, etc. We are prideful, selfish, slothful, lustful, cold of heart, deceitful, to ourselves and others. In those rare moments that we admit we are sinners, we immediately begin our self-justification covering our nakedness of soul, regaining our composure we regain our self-respect. We grant that we are not perfect but refuse to grant that our imperfections are very important – at least not as bad as -----whatever you want to put in the blank. Maybe we ought to amputate our resentments, some feeling of hostility toward someone who hurt us/you, a word or deed spoken or done that hurt or damaged a relationship. Maybe the thing we need to get rid of is the resentment, so we can see who we are, as forgiven, redeemed children of God. Rather than spending time sorting people into them and us, just remember that wherever you draw the line, Christ is more than likely on the other side. So allow the grace of God to act as salt, to preserve your faith, to instill hope in your mind and spirit, and then go out and add some spice to life. Help others, in the name of Christ, with or without words. Being a part of the body of Christ does not mean we lose our individuality, personality, or creativity, rather we find ourselves in our relationship with God and one another.

If you want to be a witness to Christ in this world, let your neighbors see how much you love your family and faith community. The salt of God's presence is peace, inner tranquility, solidarity with the poor, harmony with people of diverse perspectives and traditions. Harmony with others reflects peace that comes from an inner sense of whose you are – you are God's precious son or daughter and you have the source of love that will allow you to avoid judgment and work for peace. Mark finishes the sayings by reminding us that those who are in Christ will live in peace with each other, in community, in solidarity, receptive to God's grace, and willing to share it with others.