

Sermon on Mark 9:38-50
17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 27, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Last Sunday we heard Jesus' reaction to his disciples' arguing among themselves over who was the greatest – when he said those who want to be great must first learn how to serve, that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. He reminded them how critical it was for his followers to welcome the most vulnerable and the outcast, using the example of a little child. Those who welcome a little child in his name, welcome Jesus. Not only that, they welcome God. It's a lesson in humility that all of us who believe do well to heed.

Today Jesus goes further, as he challenges his disciples again. For they had reported to him that they had seen someone “casting out demons in his name” – and he was not one of them, he was not a disciple of Jesus, so they tried to stop him. To their surprise, Jesus said, “Do not stop him...for whoever is not against us is for us.” Anyone who did an act of love, healing or an exorcism in his name was helping to share the good news of God's kingdom, and should not be discouraged. Jesus warned his disciples against placing a stumbling block or any obstacle in the way of another who believes. So, Jesus told them, whatever causes you to stumble, get rid of it. He used an extreme image to make his point: if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. The same for your eye or your tongue – if anything keeps you or another from hearing the gospel and believing, it's best to get rid of it. Because the consequences are that what causes us to stumble may distract us or prevent us from realizing the life that we are all promised. So this is really important: it's a matter of life or death.

What does this have to do with us today, you may ask? Well, first let's look at the problem the disciples first identified: someone who was not part of their “group” was doing the work of God, in Jesus' name. Today in America, we happen to have more than one “group” doing the work of the Church, in Jesus' name. There are almost 11,000 Lutheran churches in the ELCA – but we are not in the majority in the U.S. There are many thousand other churches who are not “like us” – some are Lutheran, many are Baptist, or Roman Catholic, or Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopal – in our country, the names are limitless! We do not always believe exactly the same things about God, or interpret scripture in the same ways. That is a good thing, we believe. Diversity is a gift of God we say, and in the U.S. we treasure our many differences in belief as our right in a free country. We'd fight for our right to be unique and different, even as we may not understand – even resent the ways in which others may believe or practice faith different from us. It's kind of an ironic double standard we Americans have! Maybe it's just a

human thing! But maybe we have this “exclusiveness” in common with the disciples!

So Jesus points out the error in us when we claim to own the exclusive truth in “our” church versus the truths other churches and believers may claim. No one person or church has the corner on the truth – this isn’t a verse from the Bible, but it is certainly something we all believe as true! We may say that there is “one true God”, and believe that Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life” – but the difference is that no person or church has a claim on what that truth is! But in our worst moments we don’t realize that in ourselves, or admit our exclusive claims. Because we are often prisoners of our own opinions or beliefs, which have become ingrained in us over a lifetime of learning, and we are sometimes unable to see the truth in someone else’s beliefs that differ from ours. But the reality that there are many sides or facets to the truth of God seems proven by the fact that Christian persons of faith may see the truth much differently. We saw this to be true at our own ELCA Churchwide Assembly this past August. Lutherans who are equally faithful Christians come to completely different conclusions about human sexuality and faith. Some faithful Christians believe that homosexuality is a sin; just as many faithful Christians do not believe that. Some faithful Christians don’t believe that gay Christians living in a committed relationship should be ordained as pastors in the Church; just as many believe that gay Christians can and should be ordained as pastors in the Church, following the same requirements of commitment and fidelity as heterosexual Christians are. Our Church has “agreed to disagree” on this issue, on the basis that faithful Christians can come to opposite conclusions on a matter of faith. Our Churchwide Assembly has voted to allow the decision on whether to call a gay pastor who is living in a committed relationship to remain with the congregation doing the calling. This doesn’t mean, however, that everybody likes it! Some Lutheran churches are talking amongst themselves about leaving the ELCA over this, or at least stating their protest. Most of us think that those who disagree with us on this issue are sadly mistaken, or even self-righteous. So perhaps the question for all of us is, can we abide the person or church who does good works of faith in Jesus’ name, when they aren’t in the same church as us or they don’t believe the same as us? Can we remain in one Church if we are not all of one mind?

When Jesus says that we should remove anything that is a stumbling block to another believer, we usually think this means removing some sinful action. We think first of harmful words, of infidelity in faith or in marriage, of abuse of a spouse, child or another human being, blatant racism, addiction, or the committing of some crime. This is of course, true! We should stop or remove those sinful actions which interfere with or prevent another person from believing the words of grace and life given us by our Lord Jesus Christ. So if a hand causes you to sin,

and creates a stumbling block to faith, indeed, cut it off (maybe not literally, but stop it, just the same!).

There's another kind of stumbling block that Jesus is talking about today, which is not so obvious as such sinful acts just named. Could Jesus also be talking about our claims to exclusiveness in holding the truth of God, or representing the gospel of Jesus Christ ourselves? According to this text from scripture, yes he is! John, one of Jesus' closest disciples, came to Jesus with his concern about a person not from their group of disciples exorcising demons in Jesus' name. Jesus' response? Not to worry. For whoever is not against us is for us! If someone does a good work of faith in Jesus' name, it is a good thing. So stop complaining, and thinking that you have exclusive claim to doing my work – even you, John, who has been with me from the beginning! Jesus reprimanded his own disciples for thinking they were his exclusive followers! Others could and did preach and do good works of faith in his name, and Jesus had no problem with that at all! Can we be so accepting of the content of such faithful witness, and not worry so much about the credentials of those who act as witnesses?

For us Christians, the only credential we need as human beings is that we are children of God, created by one Creator, all equally loved by one Heavenly Father. Our uniqueness is not that “we” are chosen by God over others, but rather comes from being created unique and different by God, who has given life to all people and chosen the whole world in Christ to be saved! Our “credentials” as Christians have been given to us by God in baptism – as a gift of love, which cannot be earned. It is a gift given to everyone and anyone whom God has created, and is accompanied by the promise of forgiveness of sins and life forever. All this is given through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been raised by God from the dead so that we may know that the promise is true. This is one truth that all Christians can agree to – and it is the most important and necessary truth of all. Anything else that we proclaim as necessary for acceptance in the Church is actually, quite secondary. So how about this: that we believe and accept the fact that we are all one in Christ in Baptism? This, after all, is a fundamental claim of the Church, and this is what makes us the Church. You don't have to be “Lutheran” to be baptized, or a Christian within the Church, but in baptism we all (including all kinds of Lutherans) are part of the whole, universal Church.

So let us release all of our claims to exclusiveness, and remember that we are all one in Christ, welcomed to the table of our Lord by Jesus himself! Our role is not to be “gatekeepers”, but witnesses to the love of Christ, and inviters of others to the table that we share with the whole Church on earth. May God strengthen our hands to serve our neighbor, our tongues to speak good news, and our feet to follow Jesus and lead others to Christ, so that all may have life in him!