

Sermon on Mark 9:38-50
18th Sunday after Pentecost, September 27, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Forgive me if I don't know how to start out this sermon – because I haven't preached in almost a month! The last Sunday I preached was on August 30, when it was still in the heat of summer – the State Fair had just begun – and so much has happened since then. Three Sunday sermons preached by other pastors not named Jim, and I'm tempted to say, along with the disciple John – “Jesus, Teacher, we heard someone preach the gospel last Sunday and she didn't sound like us!” Oh, well, think of all that has happened since the end of August. The State Fair has come and gone, school has started and college students are missing from their parents' homes, the Minnesota Twins are in a wild card race to the pennant, Majority Leader John Boehner has announced his impending retirement from Congress, and Pope Francis has visited the United States to address the Congress, the United Nations, and all the people who have come out to meet him. Where should I begin, when so much has happened that cries out for commentary! Well, I'll start out where I often do: with a story from my childhood, a long time ago.

For in order to understand most of what happens these days, we need to go back to the sandbox of our childhood. Perhaps this could get a bit too psychological, but try this out: both the Old Testament and the Gospel lessons start out with people complaining, and their best young leaders “tattle taling” on somebody else showing leadership. You know how it is – *“nobody likes a snitch!”* And in the early days of childhood, we call them “tattle-tales”. Like what parents hear in sandboxes throughout the nation from their youngest children: *“Mommy, Daddy, Jimmy threw sand on me! Make him stop!”* So what do you say to that? Do you react by banishing the alleged offender, wait for the victim to strike back with sand of her own, or do you ask the boy if he “threw it in the name of Jesus?”

Okay, it's time for my story. Back in my formative years, when I was in the sixth grade at Central Elementary School in Richfield, Minnesota, I was walking to school, as was my custom (it was less than a mile, I think). I happened to be running late, as usual, so I ran across a couple of intersections as I got closer to school. Then, up ahead, I saw my arch rival, Diane Langhoff, staring at me from afar. She wore the honored badge of the School Patrol, and she carried the red flag marked “STOP” (which was meant for cars, not kids, I'll have you know). And when I came to cross the last street and enter the school, Diane said, “Not so fast, Jimmy Erlandson! I'm turning you in to the school office.”

“On what charge,” I asked?

“I caught you running likety-split across the street!”

“But, I’m going to be late for school” I protested, “I can still make it!”

“Not on my watch,” said Diane Langhoff, school patrol. “I’m bringing you in. You should have thought about this while you were eating breakfast.”

It was no use telling her that I had missed breakfast, too. And in the days before such films as *Menace to Society*, I didn’t think to ignore her and just go to class. I went along with her to the school office to be fingerprinted.

“*Look who I found,*” Diane proudly announced to the office secretary. “*I caught Jimmy Erlandson running to school, likety split across the street!*”

“Thank you, Diane, well done” the secretary said. “Now, would you kindly just go to class together, so that both of you aren’t late? I think the idea is that every child safely gets to school on time.”

No demerits, no detention, no harm done. We both made it to class that day, and both of us graduated from high school, and from college. And guess what? Diane is now a grandmother two or three times over, and we are Facebook friends. .

If you are looking for a theological point to all of this, you probably won’t find one. But it does serve to introduce the point of the scripture today, which is what God has to say about all of our rivalries, complaints and accusations against one another in this world – even in the name of religion. Don’t sweat it, especially if those whose actions you question are doing no harm, but actually doing good!

Tattle-tales. Both Moses and Jesus had this problem. In the first lesson the people had come to Moses complaining how much better life had been in Egypt, because they were suffering from hunger and thirst in the wilderness. When they had been slaves, they still had something to eat every day, and now they remembered how good that food had been – the fish, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onion and the garlic – makes me hungry just to hear about it! All God gave them in this wilderness was *manna* from heaven – no meat! So an exasperated Moses complained himself to God – “What am I going to do with these people?” So God told Moses to gather seventy elders in a tent, so that God would bless them, and they could help Moses care for the people. Which Moses did. Soon those elders were prophesying in the spirit of the Lord. But there were two, named Eldad and Medad, who had not been in the tent with the others – they hadn’t even left the camp! But they had still been blessed by God (unknown to Moses and the others), and so they also prophesied – in the camp. Somebody saw them, and ran to tell Joshua, who came to Moses and asked him to stop them. Tattle-tales! But Moses said “Don’t be jealous just because they hadn’t been there in the tent to get the power. Wouldn’t it be great if ALL God’s people could be prophets – with the spirit of the Lord?” (Can I hear an “Amen”?)

And then there was Jesus, walking with his disciples on the way to Jerusalem, teaching them what it meant to be his followers, about sacrifice and

service to God and neighbor. He had just taught them (in last Sunday's gospel lesson), when he had heard them arguing about who was the greatest, that those who want to be the "greatest" must first learn to serve others. And whoever welcomes a little child welcomes Jesus, and God – who had sent him!

But then John told Jesus how they had seen someone casting out demons in his name – and they didn't even know him – *he was not one of us!* It didn't phase Jesus at all. So, he said? If he's exorcising demons, he's on our side! Don't stop him – if he's not against us, he is for us! If he does a good thing to help others, what's the harm? *Anyone who gives you a cup of cold water when you are thirsty* – because you bear the name of Christ – doesn't lose any credit. So stop putting stumbling blocks in front of people! Be like salt - make a difference in this world – and be at peace with one another!

These days we have great difficulty giving anybody any credit or space to do good, if they don't believe the same as us, or come from the same place! Whether its politics, or sports, country or religion, we tend not to honor others unless we either agree with them or they are from our same "tribe". (Am I wrong about this?) We see this in public life every day – in the political debates in Congress when Democrats mock Republicans, and conservatives disparage liberals. The result is that nobody listens to each other, and nothing gets done! Right? We see it also in the polarization of religions, when evangelicals and "mainline" protestants and Catholics discount one another, and so many regard all persons of the Muslim faith with suspicion and fear (confusing them with the extremists they see on tv).

So it was so refreshing this past week, to have Pope Francis come to the United States and visit Washington D.C., New York City, and Philadelphia, the "city of brotherly love". I think Pope Francis gave us a little taste of what being with Jesus might have been like when he addressed the United States Congress, and without naming names or disparaging political parties, named the elephant in the room - how we and our leaders have forgotten the real purpose and mission of this republic: service to others and to seek the common good! And he said it with authority and without apology – with the authority of God and scripture and a 2000 year tradition of the Church of Jesus Christ – that our highest calling is to care for the vulnerable and those suffering from poverty – especially now those refugees who have been forced to flee the violence of civil war or religious intolerance, and the immigrants who come for opportunity and life for their children, just as we and our ancestors did. The Pope declared that the chief aim of all politics is *the common good!* (Not to "win" at all costs!) Pope Francis challenges us today – in the name of Christ – that our response to the polarization and violence done in the name of religion or of country – must not be revenge, but hope and healing, peace and justice! It all starts by seeing in every human being the face of Christ, every person created in the image and likeness of God! Now THAT's good news!

Closer to home, perhaps the days are gone when Lutherans and Catholics in Minnesota were in competition with one another, and some Protestants saw the Pope as the “AntiChrist” (a remnant of Martin Luther’s hyperbole!). We get along better now, because we face many of the same challenges as churches! I hope we don’t just transfer our old prejudices to other religious or ethnic groups! But being human, we always have to guard against that old sin of racial and religious prejudice!

Still, look at the example of the ministry being done out of this place today – it’s not all done by us – the Lutherans! By October 1st there will be FIVE congregations holding worship and doing ministry out of this building: - only one being Lutheran (that’s us!), two are Hmong, one is Latino, and one has an African immigrant female pastor. Three are evangelical, and the Latino congregation is Seventh Day Adventist – so I think we are the only ones who sing to the organ, or use Gregorian chant and incense during worship! But, hey – if they are proclaiming the Word of God – the free gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ – to their communities in ways that we can’t, which then can be heard – what is the harm, and let us bless them! If any of them gives you or me a cup of cold water to drink because (or even though) we are Lutherans, so much the better witness for them! Also, to think of all the good that is being done in the twelve step groups which meet here at Redeemer – A.A. and Narcotics Anonymous and support for those who have family members suffering from Mental Illness – what better witness to the compassion and mercy of Jesus Christ, who reached out to the sick and the suffering with welcome and healing! If we are not careful, we Lutherans just might replace our stereotype of being quiet, shy and in hospitable with a brand new reputation, of being enthusiastic about the good news of justice and peace, and welcoming everyone who comes in our doors! I don’t know what that would do to our humility and sense of decorum!

Seriously, though, Moses, Jesus, and now Pope Francis continue for us an unbroken tradition of God’s compassion and love for all human beings, which began with a promise in the desert to a couple named Abraham and Sarah. It was a promise from God to bless every human being whom God has made, even – especially – when others do not bless or value them – because we all are creations of God. And part of God’s blessing is our differences – we don’t all look, think, or act the same (thank God!) – and we don’t even worship or think of God in the same way! But it’s alright! Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or Jew - God will make a blessing of anyone’s loving witness to God, and use our service to one another as a witness to God’s love for the whole world! For the unity, in all our diversity, is our love. Thanks be to God! Amen.