

Pentecost XVII (Proper 21 B)
September 27, 2009

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

"Teacher," they said to Jesus, "we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."
[Mark 9:38]

You might remember that last week, the portion of the gospel of Mark that we read was about being a servant. Jesus and his disciples have been traveling toward Jerusalem and he has been teaching them... trying to prepare them for the future. You might also remember that in Mark, the disciples are often, well, a little slow on the uptake.

We shouldn't blame them really. They couldn't have been expected to understand the full implications of their work and ministry. Or to see what was going to be inevitable, given the course Jesus has set. But Mark does seem to harp on their, shall we say, weaknesses and not their strengths. To put it bluntly, in Mark the disciples are clueless!

Today's reading starts off with a perfect example. Even the casual reader can almost hear them whining: Jesus, Jesus... he's not playing fair! He isn't even playing on our team. Make him stop!

I'm sorry. I really shouldn't make fun. It's just that Mark makes it so easy! And of course, they are so very human. And at the very least, that makes it easy to relate to them, if only we let ourselves.

But here we are... in the 21st century... with more ways and opportunities to be united, to build up human civilization, to save the planet... and yet we are more divided than ever; civilization is under as great a threat as ever, and the planet continues to deteriorate.

It's a problem -- this business of who's in and who's out, or who's one of us and who's not -- it's a problem on many levels.

Take nationalism, for example. What constitutes a nation? A common language? A common history? Boundaries on a map? Shared goals? As for language, we can learn different languages. We can even use a computer to translate almost instantly. While we Americans have resisted learning other languages, Canada has become virtually bilingual with hardly a ripple of resistance.

But there *is* history. The past is a strong factor in our national identity. The colonies, the Revolution, two World Wars. Of course, the most common factor being that if go back far enough, we all came from someplace else, even the American Indians.

Boundaries? Yes, but truth be told, we made those up... and they're always changing. In my lifetime alone, Alaska and Hawaii were added to the United States. On a larger

scale, one of our own astronauts pointed out that no boundaries can be seen from outer space.

Of course, we Americans have common goals, don't we? We are all of one mind about the two wars in which we're currently engaged, right? And about health care reform. How to solve the economic crisis. About prayer in schools and... OK, I know it's a cheap shot to stoop to sarcasm. I apologize.

Then again, maybe I've apologized too soon. I haven't even mentioned religion yet! Of all the things that should unite us, it is often the most divisive thing of all. You know, if you take the theology of each religion and boil it down to its essence, we could probably agree on almost everything: what constitutes a holy and good life; how we should behave in relation to those in need; about good and evil.

I am NOT saying that all religions are the same. I am saying that the very notion of religion -- of believing in something greater than ourselves -- should be grounds for respect and support. Instead, many of the most cruel and hateful acts of violence and destruction have been done in the name of a religion, including by us Christians.

And to make matters worse, we Christians can't even treat each other with respect and support. The Catholics think they're the only true way to God. The Baptists KNOW they're the only true way to God. It's like that old, old joke about heaven:

St. Peter is showing a newcomer around heaven. "There are the Presbyterians over there, and the Methodists over there," he goes on, pointing out one group after another. Then he drops his voice to a whisper, "There are the Episcopalians over there on the other side of that wall," he said. "Why are we whispering," asked the newcomer. "Because they think they're the only ones here," he answered.

Of course, that's not the way I heard it originally. Any denomination could be the ones behind the wall; just fill in the blank and it works just fine.

Now, even within our own denomination, a schism is threatened. Not because one group loves Jesus and the other doesn't. Not because one group serves God and the other doesn't. Not even because one group says the Creed and the other doesn't. But over the complexities of the Bible and over whether one way of loving is better than another way of loving.

The disciples say to Jesus: Look, that one over there... he's helping his neighbor, but he plays golf on Sunday mornings. And that one, see, she teaches adults to read, but when she comes to church, she wonders if there's anything at all to this God-business. Those people like the wrong kind of music. Those people don't do Communion the right way. Those people want to build a bigger church. Those people want to give it all away to the poor. Those people are too liberal... or too conservative... or voted for the wrong candidate.

Jesus, they lament, make them "do right"!

And what does Jesus say to all this? WHOEVER IS NOT AGAINST US IS FOR US! Whoever either says or does the right thing, whoever is trying to serve the common good, whoever is living a life rooted in love, even if they aren't officially one of "us," really *is* one of us.

Jesus can say this, can see this because he sees all of us the way God sees us: all as God's children. Not in the sense of being child-like, but in the sense of being God's creatures and made in God's image. All of us.

If only we could see each other as God in Christ see us. All with the same hopes and longings: the hope for a safe, peaceful world in which to live and raise our children; the longing for opportunities to work and to make the most of our time in this world.

I know there are fanatics among us, but they are in truth, small in number. And if we could manage to create a world in which we understand each other as all God's children, I believe their fanaticism would die for lack of fuel.

So, what IF? What if we did begin to see others – those from other countries, those of other religions, those who are different from us, those whose politics or ideas are different from ours – as God sees them? As God sees all of us... How would this affect the way we understand the issues of our time? God help us if it doesn't.

Amen.

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