

Expanding Community
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – September 26, 2021

PLEASE READ:
James 5.13-20
Mark 9:38-50

The story is told of a guided tour of heaven. The archangel Michael is leading the tour and as his group approached a certain section of heaven, he put his finger to his lips asking the group to please be quiet. “You see,” he whispered, “Behind that door are the Presbyterians. They think they’re the only ones here!” ☺

You can, as you wish, of course, place a name of any number of other groups in the place of the Presbyterians. You might think of Roman Catholics, or Baptists, or Lutherans, or whichever denomination or sect of people who think they have the exclusive rights to heaven ... Whether its countries realizing that there are other countries that need to be included as allies, or a circle of friends at school who argue about who should be allowed in their group on the playground, or political parties, we humans have a knack for separating ourselves out into those who are “in” and those who are “out.” As a progressive congregation in New Canaan, we are sensitive to issues of inclusivity. But even we struggle with our exclusive tendencies.

The early disciples were no different, and while the gospel lesson seems to be a random collection of sayings, it can be seen as a three-part approach to expand our vision of community.

Today’s lesson continues from where we left off last week. Jesus reminded his disciples that he will be betrayed, killed, and rise again, and that paradoxically this is part of the divine plan of redemption. God who is great is willing to become small for our sake. The God who lives is willing to die for us. The God who is powerful is willing to be the servant of all for our sake. The God who is Lord over all is willing to welcome even the little ones ... and *God calls us to do the same.*

It is ironic and scandalous that the disciples yet again completely miss the point of who Jesus is and how his community, the kingdom of God, really functions. It is John, one of the *inner circles* of Jesus’ disciples, who “saw someone casting out demons in Jesus’ name,” and confesses that they “tried to stop him because he was not following us.” How quickly do we make the gospel of Jesus Christ all about *us* and *our* agenda ...?

In the famous fictional book by C.S. Lewis called *The Screwtape Letters*, a devil named Screwtape advises his nephew devil named Wormwood on how to tempt a young Christian. In one of his letters, Screwtape advises, "if a person can't be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send them all over town looking for the church that suits them until they become a *taster* or *connoisseur of churches.*" Screwtape suggests it is best to tempt a Christian into not attending a local church which brings together a variety of people into a genuine unity born by God. It is preferable, from the devil's standpoint, to have them looking for the perfect church, designed for their tastes, much as they might look for a country club, or a social group. Screwtape reminds his nephew that the search for the "perfect" church makes the person a *critic*, where God wants the person to be a *pupil*. The worst problem, as Screwtape sees it, is the person who can go to any church with an attitude of humble receptivity to whatever spiritual nourishment is offered. Music,

readings, sermons and prayers received with this attitude are extremely dangerous to the likes of Screwtape. Devils prefer a long search for the "perfect" church...

The disciples want to establish the perfect church also, and quickly criticize one who is different from them. In fact, a subtle point here is that while they have not been able, this other man is able to cast out demons. Perhaps they are jealous, or afraid that they are not as powerful? Whatever their motivations, Jesus tells them to relax: "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will not be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." In other words, Jesus is advocating an extreme tolerance for establishing who is "in" and who is "out" of the community formed around him.

John Wesley liked to quote, "In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; and in all else charity." It's a good motto for any church. We here at First Presbyterian Church have our four pillars, "to live spiritually, to love inclusively, to learn continuously and to leave a legacy." We're open and affirming. We are what is called a center set community, and not a bounded set community. The essential center of our life together is the Crucified-Risen Lord. It is not for us to put up boundaries about who can be in or who can be out, but rather point to Jesus, and to humbly confess that "whoever is not against us is for us ..."

Jesus is clear that there are deeds of power associated with his name, and that there are those who through baptism "bear the name of Christ." But there's a permeable and porous quality to the edges of Christian community. The implication here is that even those who do *not* bear the name of Christ, but who are willing to do something as small as give a cup of water to those who do *bear the name of Christ* are recognized and blessed by our Lord. Jesus says they will "by no means lose their reward." It's a cryptic promise, but humbling ... How do we welcome the agnostic, the atheist, the Buddhist, the New Ager, the Unitarian, the person for whatever reason walks through our doors seeking a deeper faith, a fairer world, a better life? How do we embody the welcome and love of Jesus Christ so as not to cause someone to stumble and fall along the way to God?

I actually think you are a very welcoming congregation. I was impressed yesterday at Dan Bergfeld's memorial how Chris Tate talked about how growing up in this church he was made to feel welcome and that he belonged, especially as a kid and a teenager who had a lot of questions ... We have been welcoming, but welcome requires constant effort and genuine creativity...

We're still in the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot*. For Jews this is a celebration of the "feast of booths," and many Jewish families will put up a makeshift tent or shelter out in their yard remembering their ancestors who wandered through the desert on their way to the promised land. It's a time, one of my rabbi friends taught me, to remember that shalom, peace, or "the way it's supposed to be," is a fragile reality, which requires constant work and cooperation. It's like a tent that gets blown over by the wind. You have to constantly put it back together again and again...

It's the same way with welcome. God brings really different people together to work out together the authentic community God desires, where all are welcome. We can learn from Special Church. I was blessed again this past week. I was invited to lead singing ... I was touched when one

of the down syndrome members put her arm around me and said with all sincerity, “You’re a good boy.” And another responded, “We are glad you are here ... you are part of our family.”

Are we not supposed to welcome the outsiders, those who are not like us, who don’t follow *our way* of living, who don’t even share our views? It seems to me, Jesus in our text today is promoting a radical inclusivity, a very open cultural architecture for community. Whoever is willing to take on the name of Christ here is welcome, of course. But we should also make the way clear for those who are not yet willing to bear the name of Christ, but who are willing to assist in even the smallest way the ministry and mission of Christ, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly ... They are blessed by God and will receive a reward! Jesus, in fact, is adamant about this welcoming and open culture for his community, and the next series of sharp teachings stress how serious an issue this is for him!

In the context of being a welcoming community, Jesus says that it would be better if a millstone were tied around our neck, and you were thrown into the sea than to put “a stumbling block before one of these little ones.” I think the point is clear that we had better reconsider the importance of the ministry of hospitality, of welcome, of tolerance and openness especially to those who may seem inconsequential, powerless, unimportant, undeserving, or irritating from our perspective. There is nobody who should not receive a gracious welcome into God’s community, and there is quite literally hell to pay if we do not do what we can to clear the way for others to know the amazing grace of Jesus. Hurling a sinner to a watery grave is a graphic way, indeed, for Jesus to convey God’s wrath against spiritual pride, bigotry, and exclusivity.

But what of Jesus’ teaching, “If your hand, or your foot, or your eye causes you to stumble, cut it off or tear it out ...”? Frightful imagery, really. Seriously, do not try this at home! Obviously, this teaching is not to be taken *literally*, but nonetheless a teaching to be taken *seriously*. Jesus here claims the uncompromising offense of the gospel and his authority; that nothing, not even things we value supremely like eyes, hands and feet, should stand in the way of our relationship with God, with eternal life. The metaphor of eyes, hands, and feet is all-inclusive of what we view, what we do, where we go. Are we living in such a way as to enter into the kingdom of God, to experience with neighbors the fullness of God’s grace and love?

When you look at the lives of the early follower of Jesus, we find they had to endure the loss of friends and the loss of many other personal advantages to join the fellowship of the church. As Paul put it, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Following Jesus is not easy. It costs us. It involves self-surrender - giving our lives to Christ daily. But that is only imaginable if we first recognize that he cut off himself completely, emptied himself entirely, surrendered supremely, abandoned his glory absolutely; he gave up everything utterly so that we might experience God’s unqualified welcome.

You and I cannot begin to experience the riches of Christ’s glories; we cannot enter into this new life in partnership with Christ without letting go of what was before ... The surprise here in the context of Jesus teaching on welcoming the little ones is that while our natural inclination is to cut others out of the community in order to achieve the uniform fellowship we imagine; in fact, we are called to cut out anything that would keep the Spirit of God from forging in us the miracle of authentic community. We’re not called to cut out anyone else, but rather confess to one another

how desperately we need God's mercy, and how desperately we need the prayers of loving and forgiving siblings as we loosen the huge millstones of pride and prejudice from around our own little necks...

Jesus' mystifying conclusion to this teaching seems to charge us to maintain the distinctive saltiness of discipleship; that we are to be unified in the essentials of bearing his name, but called to do so peacefully, in a way that includes others and restores and renews God's life-giving shalom for all. Who knows, maybe as we expand our vision, we'll begin to see that the community of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven, and that not just the Presbyterians, Catholics, Methodists, Baptists and Pentecostals ... but, well ... EVERYONE ... straight, LGBTQ, Caucasians, African Americans, Asians, First Nation, Democrats, Republicans, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Atheists, Agnostics ... yes: EVERYONE is welcome!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.