

The Body of Christ

Pr 21 Yr B Mark 9:38-50 September 26, 2021

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On Sunday morning people come to St. James to worship. Others go to the St. Ninian's, or the University chapel or to Bethany for mass. There is also at St. Paul, Full Gospel Assembly, Antigonish Baptist and Grace Harvest. And I know there are other groups which gather for worship and I haven't even mentioned the churches just outside of town but you get the point- there are a lot of different places to worship on Sunday.

You could look at that and be dismayed that the Christian church, the followers of Jesus are so fractured and divided among ourselves. You might even conclude that the body of Christ, a frequent image for the church, is broken. And yet you could also look at the different churches in our community and realize that in a town of four thousand there are places big and small where people come together to worship, to learn, to be the body of Christ each week. There are also services from Antigonish on the internet so people can join with others to worship within their own homes at different times of the week. And I believe that is a great source of joy to God.

This morning's Gospel lesson challenges us to look at who is part of the church, the body of Christ in a different way. The disciple John comes before Jesus with a concern that someone outside of their groups is working, doing good things, in Jesus' name. And John argues that the man should be told to stop and has no right to do these things in Jesus' name because he is not part of the twelve disciples. And after listening to the disciple's impassioned argument, Jesus says simply, "let that person continue. For no one who does good in my name will be able to soon afterward speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

Now I doubt many of us would agree with John's rigid understanding of where to draw the line. Because most of us have been to others churches, have family in other denominations, and can appreciate the good in what other Christians say and do. Even if we're not Roman Catholic we can applaud the good works of Mother Theresa. Even if we're not Baptist we can admire the faith of Billy Graham. Even if we're not Anglican we can respect the writings of C.S. Lewis.

And let me expand that to worship in this time of Covid. Our online service are not the same as going through the doors and hearing the word spoken and communion shared. Yet I can tell you that it was a godsend for us at St. James through the lock down. And I know in the last 18 months the online service has allowed us to connect with

new people and to reconnect with those who once called this church home.

And with all that in mind it isn't hard for us to accept that if someone worships in a way we don't, has beliefs that aren't identical to ours, and follows a different tradition they could still be a follower of Jesus. We can see the merit in Jesus' words and see church, the body of Christ, as greater than what we are doing here in this place.

But when we step a bit further out, when we encounter those who refuse to recognize us as Christians because of what we believe, and others who believe things at odds with our beliefs, it soon becomes more difficult and Jesus' words become harder for us to hear. Because accepting people who are similar to us, who find meaning in what we find meaningful, that is relatively simple.

But when we come up against people whose specific beliefs clash with our beliefs is when things become more difficult. Because it would be tempting to fall back to John's position in our gospel lesson and claim that those people are not a real followers of Jesus and God isn't with them. That the people who hold things we think are wrong have no connection to the holy. But unfortunately that isn't where Jesus calls us to in this lesson.

Because while we would like to reject those who have different beliefs and practices, completely dismiss worship and faith which looks different and sounds different and is different than what we are used to the fact is that Jesus words "whoever is not against us is for us" call us to a much different approach- to recognize that it is not our place to decide who is in or out of the faith.

And I want to pause on that point for a moment. Because I am not suggesting that we compromise our beliefs on what is important. There are churches whose positions on women, minorities, sexuality I believe are plain and simply wrong. I'm not going to accept what they believe or teach. And Jesus' words me don't tell me that I have to condone or approve of those beliefs which are the opposite of mine.

But, and this is important, Jesus is clear that I can't simply assume that God has no use for the churches I disagree with. Because in our gospel lesson after flipping John's question around to redefine what it means to be a follower, Jesus goes on to teach two things.

The first is that as followers of Jesus we are be open to seeing God at work in places

and people we don't expect. Which means that even if we reject another church's beliefs we can't assume that God will never work through them. As people of faith we are to always watch for God. And when we see the Holy Spirit moving something or through someone we are to support that effort. Which is why we can stand with churches we disagree with to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and provide comfort in times of need. That doesn't mean we agree with them on everything. What it means is that we understand God's call to us is greater than our disagreements and different beliefs.

And secondly Jesus warns us against placing obstacles in front of anyone trying to follow Christ. As people of faith we can never insist that any specific belief or practise is necessary to follow Jesus. Which means we can't say that you have to attend worship at this time or think this doctrine is right in order to be a real disciple. Now we can certainly share what is meaningful for us and show what we believe. But in our life together we must be vigilant not to make our faith about anything other than following Jesus Christ and living and serving as God's people.

For the truth is God can and does work in many different churches and through many different people in ways that are a mystery and surprising to us and the fact remains that the Holy Spirit moves and blesses and works as the Holy Spirit does rather than how we think the Holy Spirit should act.

And those two points, to be open to God's work in every place and to place obstacles in the way of another's faith, are how we are to approach other followers of Jesus. Because we tend to view things by our own standards. We go by what has touched us, what is familiar to us, and what we assume is the best. And please don't misunderstand, the ways in which God has blessed you spiritually and the ways in which God has worked within our congregation and the United Church of Canada are wonderful and deserve to be celebrated. But we do not own this church.

This is a church of Jesus Christ. And it is Christ's call and presence which makes this a church. Not who is standing up at the front. Not what type of music is played. Not what name is on the door. And when we realize that we become a better witnesses and disciples because we become less focussed on doing things in a good way and instead strive to do them in God's way. And we discover that what we do is less important than who we do it for. So instead of trying to get people to follow our way we join with others in following Jesus.