

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
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Mark 9:38-41

(Jesus said) "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." (Mark 10:25 N.R.S.V.)

The Limits to Tolerance

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life and your life.

In our text, the disciple John comes to Jesus and says, "We caught this con man doing healing in your name. We told him to stop that immediately. That was the right thing to do wasn't it?"

Surprisingly, Jesus says, "No, let him alone. For anyone who does miracles in my name will not soon be able to speak ill of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

There is a part of me that loves this text. We human beings are always drawing circles to define who is in and who is out. Yet, time and again, Jesus scuffs out our lines and insists that the love of God is far broader than that.

In addition, all of us have run into our share of spiritual bullies. People who insist that those who don't believe exactly like they do, are wrong, inferior, and headed for hell. A fellow minister in our Presbytery goes so far as to call these people, spiritual terrorists. We don't want to go down that road.

Yes, we know that there have always been people who could not admit that they were wrong. People whose thinking and acting have led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism.

So, yes, I really like this text. But as author, Alan Bloom points out, there is another side to this coin. Bloom is concerned that we have become so open minded and tolerate that we have lost our way. He says America has become so enamored of tolerance that we are left drifting in a sea of relativism in which all behavior and thinking are held to be equally valid.

In the face of many competing religious beliefs, it has become common to say, "It doesn't really matter what you believe, as long as you believe it sincerely." I submit to you that while this sounds like a virtue, it is in reality a spiritual and intellectual laziness. As such it is not only wrong

but incredibly dangerous.

On an individual level this is easy to see. There was a teenager in Pickens who told his friends that getting hit by a car won't really hurt you. To prove his point, he jumped out in front of a passing car. The fact that this teenager sincerely believed that he was right and that he had the courage of his convictions, did not protect him in the least. He was wrong, dead wrong as it turned out. The car hit him and killed him.

Now listen, in World War II, Hitler believed he was right and convinced millions of his people to follow him in committing all kinds of atrocities. Most people know that Hitler and his government killed some six million Jews. What is not so widely known is that Hitler had at least that many other political prisoners killed. These were people who opposed him or didn't believe as he did.

What we believe matters because right thinking leads to right action. Wrong thinking, leads to wrong actions.

The tolerance that Jesus calls for here is not a lazy indifference, or an unwillingness to do the hard work of study and prayer for spiritual discernment. The tolerance that Jesus calls us to follow is a reminder that God sometimes uses even ungodly people to bring about his purpose or to speak his truth.

Many of you know that I like to read Science Fiction books. I don't read them for their wisdom. I read them to relax. In my ministry work, I deal with people who have very real hurts, troubles, and problems. These are people and problems that matter very much. Science Fiction books provide a break from that. After all, in science fiction, the characters are make believe, the troubles are make believe, none of it really matters.

Yet, every once in awhile, I come across some profound truth in these books. Right now I am reading a book called, "Trial of Intention," by Peter Orullian. In the book one of the characters is dealing with a terrible loss and her friend seeks to comfort her. Orullian writes these words of wisdom, ". . . when the heart fails, what is needed is a friend who doesn't falsely reassure, and can walk with you just because. Doing things because. That's what friends do when the heart fails."

I have no idea whether Orullian is a Christian or not. His words in this particular phrase ring with God's kind of truth.

We treat others with the right kind of tolerance when we remember that God can speak his truth through anyone. Therefore, we need to listen carefully. In addition, God values and loves even those who actively oppose him. So we are never permitted to treat others as worthless or as undeserving of love.

Let me shift gears a bit and set another verse beside the one we are dealing with today. In Mark Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us." However, in Matthew 12:30 Jesus says,

“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”

It seems to be two contradictory passages. Yet a closer look reveals a subtle difference. In Mark Jesus says, “Whoever is not against us, is with us.” The us in that case seems to refer to the disciples. It is a reminder that God is at work, not just in our little circle of friends, not just in our church, not just in the greater Christian church around the world, but in every place. So we do well to keep our eyes open for God at work in the world in unexpected places. We need to keep our ears open for God’s truth coming through unexpected people.

In the passages from Matthew, Jesus says, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” In Matthew the emphasis is on Jesus. Whoever is not with me. So we are reminded of Jesus’ saying in John 14, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to Father except through me.”

The popular concept of tolerance in our country where everyone’s beliefs are held to be equally valid has robbed us of our zeal for evangelism. There is an old joke that asks, “What do you get when you cross a Presbyterian with a Jehovah’s Witness?” The answer, “Someone who goes and knocks on doors, but has nothing to say.”

Folks we need to get over ourselves and realize that we have a story to tell. God has called us to be evangelists, to tell the good news of salvation, to make disciples for Jesus Christ. Just before he left, Jesus told his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

I remember talking with a college student once, I’ll call him Joe. Joe was struggling with his faith. He told me that he had a friend in school who was from another country. This friend had been raised in a family who were Buddhists. Joe said, “If I had been raised in that country and in that family, I would probably be Buddhist also. How can I know that my faith is right and his is not?”

Good question, Joe. How do we know that the different religions of the world are not all simply different paths up the same mountain, such that all the paths meet at the top? It is a nice thought that question.

Stephen Prothero, who is a professor of religion at Boston University, published a book called, “God is not One.” In the book Prothero looks at eight of the world’s major religions. He points out that the different religions don’t seek to answer the same questions and that they have very different goals. He says that if the different religions are all paths up the mountain, they are all on different mountains leading to very different mountaintops.

In the end it is not up to us to answer the question of who will be saved and who will not be saved. Our responsibility is to share what has been revealed to us. We are to give others the same opportunity that has been given to us, the opportunity to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and savior.

Now look, if you knew of a cheap easy cure for cancer, would you keep that to yourself? Would you refuse to tell your best friend who is dying from cancer that you know a cure? Would you say, "I better not say anything, he is taking chemo and he really believes that is going to cure him. He might get offended if I told him I know a quick and easy cure." Would you do that? Of course not, you would tell everyone you met about this great good news. Cancer has been whipped!

How much more should we be excited and willing to tell the good news of eternal life!!!

Proper tolerance is remembering that Jesus said, "He that is not against us, is for us." We are reminded that God's truth and God's work is not limited to our little circle.

Proper tolerance is also remembering that Jesus said, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." We are reminded that those who are not with Jesus need to be told about him. Our job is to extend the invitation, to tell the good news.

Someone did a survey recently in which they found that the average Episcopalian invites someone to church only once in twenty years. To which some of my Episcopalian friends have said, "You better watch out, because this is the twentieth year!"

Well, I would hope that it is the twentieth year for us Presbyterians as well. By all means be respectful when you invite others, but also by all means do invite. For what we have to share is not just good news, it is the best news!

Amen.