

People and Peacemaking a sermon by Rev. Keenan Kelsey Noe Valley Ministry  
October 1, 2006

Text: Mark 9:38-50

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him. No one who performs a miracle in my name will be able soon afterward to say evil things about me. For whoever is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kin-dom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. For every one will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

I REALLY LOVE this scripture passage – or at least the first part of it! A whining and somewhat indignant disciple tells Jesus that they had seen someone casting out demons in Jesus' name. "And we tried to stop him," says John, "because" (listen to this!) "he was not following us."

Following-- whom? Excuse me? He was not following us. (Never mind that the person in question was following Jesus! Apparently we don't care about that! He was not following us! He wasn't part of our group. He had not qualified; he had not paid his dues. He didn't look like us, think like us, sound like us, hang out with us. So we wrote him off. We told him to stop.

Oh dear! Did I slip into "We" instead of "They"?

I guess I did, because in truth, doesn't this sound painfully familiar? Who is in and who is out? Who's for and who's against? Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the most "Christian" of them all?

John and his buddies may have been the first Christians to ask questions like that, but they certainly weren't the last. We know about ancient historical church wars and church splits over definition of the Trinity and papal authority and appropriate rituals and rites, and grace versus works. In the mid-twentieth century, dividing issues were divorce and gambling, dancing and drinking, smoking and Sabbath-keeping

In this century, we descendants of John find ways to point fingers at the liberals, the conservatives, the evangelicals, the social activists, the pro-lifers, the pro-choicers, those in favor of stem-cell research, those against it, those embracing ordination of GLBT's, those who against it, those who espouse evolution, those who believe in Intelligent Design. A journalist once asked Carl Sandburg, "What is the ugliest word in the English language?" After a few minutes Sandburg replied, "Exclusive."

"Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us," And Jesus says: "Do not stop him; Whoever is not against us is for us." The disciples completely missed out on the fact that God was working through the accused. They were blind to God's presence in a person who wasn't part of their group.

We live in a world that is very different from the one in which many of us grew up. Many of us went to school without having a single Jewish classmate—let alone a Buddhist, Muslim or Hindu. It is no longer that way. The U.S. has recently been called the most religiously diverse nation in the world. People of other religions no longer live far away in some exotic country; they populate our cities and they are our neighbors in small towns like Alachua. They work with us in our offices, schools, and hospitals. Did you know that there are more Muslims in the United States than either Episcopalians or Presbyterians? And they share many of our own beliefs and understandings about God.

On this Peacemaking Sunday, it is critical to acknowledge that intolerant religion is behind most of the violent conflicts in the world today. Defensiveness yields to criticism yields to fear yields to violence and even terrorism – all of which result when people act on the conviction that they alone know the mind and heart of God.

Yet pluralism is the reality of our global community. Christianity is only about 1/3 of the world's population. Islam is the second largest with about 1/5 of the population. Hinduism, one of the most ancient religious families on earth, accounts for 15% of the world population. Buddhism, an offshoot of Hinduism, accounts for 6%, or about 400 million people. And Judaism, from which Christianity is descended, accounts for just ¼ of one percent, or about 14 million people, worldwide.

It is essential that we continue to learn more about the other major religions of the world— to understand them, to identify our similarities, to note the things we can learn and profit from each other.

I wonder why it is that we are so anxious to protect our own turf. It happens among religions and within religions as well. Some of you have heard the story of a man who was walking across a narrow bridge and came upon another man facing him in an impasse. The first man shouted "Stop! Are you a Christian?" "Yes, as a matter of fact I am." "Well so am I. Are you Catholic or Protestant?" "I'm Protestant," "Well so am I. Are you Episcopal or Baptist?" "I'm Baptist." "Wow... I am too. Are you Southern Baptist or American Baptist?" "I'm Southern Baptist," "Me too, that's amazing! Are you original Southern Baptist or Southern Baptist reformed?" "I'm Southern Baptist reformed." "I can't believe it, so am I." But tell me are you Reformed Southern Baptist of the reformation of 1879, or reformed Southern Baptist of the Reformation of 1915?" He answered, "Reformed Baptist, reformation of 1915." To which the first man said, "Die you heretic," and he pushed him off the bridge.

The disciples wanted to push the interloper off the bridge, to protect their turf, but Jesus had a better way. They were to be the facilitators not manipulators of the coming realm.

The Society of International Law, in London, observed that during the last 3,550 years of recorded history there have been only 268 years of peace. That means that since the beginning of recorded history, the entire world has been at peace less than 8 percent of the time! Even more telling, during this time over 8,000 peace treaties were made-- and broken, that represents a lot of turf wars.

Our job is to accept every person, place and thing, exactly as it is, focusing on what is good and right in ourselves and in others, and leave the rest to God. Jesus is saying, don't sit around trying to decide what God wants, get up and do the right, good, loving thing in front of you, and leave the results up to God.

Oh yes -- we still have the rest of the passage to look at, don't we? It might have been easier if Mark had stopped at verse 41. But according to the writer, Jesus is just getting cranked up! Having made his point about the outsider, Jesus moves the camera lens to focus squarely on the disciples.

Hey, let's take a little look in the mirror! "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me" If you turn away any of the most vulnerable, believers who are pushed to the margins of society, seekers who are struggling to understand Gospel living, anyone who understands God a bit differently than you do -- "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off."

Jesus sounds a little peeved at the disciples, don't you think?

Okay, this is gruesome imagery. Cutting off body parts is harsh instruction. But truly, Jesus was not being literal. We get into a lot of trouble taking our Bible too literally. Remember that Jesus was a skilled debater, a lover of language and a passionate speaker. Hyperbole was a common linguistic device. Indulging his Middle-Eastern gift for exaggeration, Jesus just wanted us to know, in the strongest possible way, we cannot continue to destroy the weak or the different among us.

"Have salt." Jesus says. Preserve what is best; for salt, like fire, has a purifying function. Moreover, it brings out inherent flavor and preserves what might otherwise decay.

Today, on World Communion, we gather as Christians, acknowledging Christianity as a world-wide phenomenon. From blazing equatorial sun to the Arctic tundra, Christians are gathering around the table today to receive the elements of a meal we call holy. But our Communion table is nothing if it is not a family table. When a family gathers around the table we come to realize that our differences aren't the most important thing about us.

The miracle of Communion means the rich bowing down with the poor, the learned with the unlearned, the clean with the filthy, the master with the slave, the privileged with the deprived, the white with the black, and the black with the white. Even, the liberal with the conservative."

And... we are not alone. We are part of a much larger company of God-seekers. The month-long fast of Ramadan, in which Muslim faithful abstain from food from dawn to dusk, began last Sunday. The highest high holy days of the Jewish year are also underway, beginning with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which began last Saturday and culminating in Yom Kippur, Day of Atonement, which begins after sunset tonight.

What a strange and beautiful fellowship this is, God-seekers in every land lifting our voices in the most disparate ways imaginable to the God of all life! How does it sound to God? Like utter cacophony? Or do the strains blend in some strange, ethereal harmony.

We have choices. "Each is given a bag of tools/ A shapeless mass/ A book of rules/And each must make, ere life has flown A stumbling block or a stepping stone" (Roy L. Sharpe) Peacemaking is about stepping stones. MAY IT BE SO.

*O God, it is true that when we do not stand for something then we may well fall for anything, and that when we do not stand for You, we may well fall from You. But forgive us when we construct barriers that divide us from our neighbor and even from You. Remind us that you are Lord not just of the Church but of all creation. Make us the sort of disciples who love the adventure of following in your expansive, ever-reaching love. In Christ's strong name we pray. Amen.*