Sunday, September 29, 1991
UNAUTHORIZED WORKS OF GOD
James 4:13-17; Mark 9:38-41

One of my most embarrassing moments took place years ago when I was back visiting a parish I had served. After the worship service, I was greeting people I hadn't seen in a long time. Trying to be nice, I asked one man whose wife I remembered as being one of my chief critics, "How's your wife, Eileen?" "Oh, she's in heaven," he quickly answered. Not thinking, I said, "I'm sorry." Then I quickly realized by the pained expression on his face that he had taken my remark the wrong way. So, trying to recover, I said, "I'm glad." Somehow that didn't sound right either, so finally I blurted out, "Well, I certainly am surprised."

The more I've thought about it, my last statement about being surprised was actually good Christian theology. It says that if any one of us pretends to know what God is doing or who is doing God's work, we may be surprised. None of us has one-hundred percent correct information on who is going to be in God's realm and who isn't, or who is definitely saved and who is not.

This little verse expresses it very well:

I dreamt death came the other night,
And Heaven's gates swung wide.
An angel with a halo bright, ushered me inside.
And there, to my astonishment,
Stood folks I'd judged and labeled
As quite unfit, of little worth
And spiritually disabled.
Indignant words rose to my lips,
But never were set free,
For every face showed stunned surprise.
Not one expected me.

Yet, have you noticed, it doesn't take very long for a group of people who have some success in doing God's work to become arrogant and exclusive? We can come to believe that God works only through us or through those we authorize. This happened to the twelve disciples, and it can happen to us.

According to the Gospel stories, the disciples had been with Jesus for some time. They had witnessed his healing of the sick and the casting out of demons. They too had had some success in doing such things. And no doubt they had some failures. Overall, however, they were feeling quite proud of their preferred status. Jesus was becoming very well known, and some of his fame had rubbed off on them. They were part of the inner circle. They expected to have privileged positions in the coming reign of God. They even had some discussions among themselves as to which one of them was the greatest. Jesus found out about that conversation and told them, "If anyone would be first among you, that one must be last of all and servant of all."

But they forgot rather quickly. One day, not long after the discussion about which one of them was the greatest, the disciple named John came to Jesus and proudly reported, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we told him to stop doing it because he was

not part of our group." It was another way of saying — this individual has not been authorized by us to heal in your name. He doesn't have the proper credentials. He hasn't applied to us for a license. He doesn't have a membership card as one of your approved followers. They could've gone on to say — he hasn't been baptized using the proper formula, or he's not been baptized at all, and we're not sure that he has the correct theology.

Perhaps the disciples were also jealous of this person's success because not long before this incident, they had tried to heal someone and had failed.

They thought they were doing the right thing, but Jesus surprised them with his answer: "Do not stop him... whoever is not against us is for us." Jesus was teaching his disciples and us a valuable lesson. God's spirit at work in the world cannot be controlled or fenced in or authorized by any one person or group or religion. God has not given an exclusive contract to one brand of Christianity, or any one denomination, or even to the Christian Church as a whole.

This story also reminds us that God's work is carried on in many different ways in this world and sometimes by people who aren't even aware they are doing God's work. This story makes me think of Mahatma Gandhi in India. He was not a Christian; he was Hindu, but in some ways, he was more Christian than many of us who worship and preach regularly. Though he was not a Christian, he taught us much about the power of selfless love, about working for justice, about non-violent compassion, and about freedom. I think Jesus would've said about Gandhi what he said about the man in this story who was healing people—"Work alongside him. Do not try to stop him. Maybe you will even learn something from him."

Isn't Jesus also implying in this story that there is no one line that we can step over and say, "Now I'm a full-blooded Christian"? We are all at different points in our spiritual journey, and we have a great deal that we can learn from each other. And we're never at a point when we can stop growing spiritually, when we have it all and know it all, when we're completely and fully spiritually mature. People begin their journey of following Jesus in many different ways, and we need to pay attention to them.

This does not mean that everyone who claims to be doing God's work is doing so, or that every person who claims that God is speaking through him or her is proclaiming God's word. In other places in the New Testament, Jesus warns his disciples and us that there are always false prophets and counterfeit religious movements at work. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves," and he went on to say, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the Kingdom of God." Later on in the New Testament, the writer of 1 John picks up Jesus' warning and tells the Christians of his time, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Before we begin looking at some ways in which we can tell the difference between true religion and false religion, let's admit that we, like those first disciples, can easily become too exclusive and think that nobody else can do God's work except our kind of people and our kind of church. Many years ago in this country, the Quakers were told by other Christians, "You are not true followers of Christ because you're not practicing your religion the way we do." "You can't be a true spokesperson for God. You didn't graduate from the right theological seminary."

Not only in religion is this a problem, but it happens in all professions and in other aspects of life as well. The spirit of narrow sectarianism is familiar enough in literature and art. Painters and poets, sculptors and novelists who “do not follow us” have been sternly reprimanded by the authorities of the time. In the history of medicine, we can find the same attitude. “That doctor could not possibly be helping people get well because he’s not doing it our way.”

In the church, we hear it all the time. Unless one is “born again” in the same way that I was “born again,” he or she cannot be a Christian. Unless one takes the same view of the Bible that we do, that person cannot really be a Christian. We think we can limit God’s work within the limits we set.

Incidentally, I like what the novelist Madeleine L’Engle said about the Bible and who is qualified to do God’s work. “The Bible is true. It’s not entirely factual, but it’s true.” That’s hard for people to understand. Fact and truth are not the same. I love what Karl Barth said: “I take the Bible far too seriously to take it literally.” Some of the Bible is history, and some of the Bible is story, and we don’t always know which is which. But it doesn’t matter. What I’m looking for in the Bible is truth. If you look at the great protagonists in the Old and New Testaments, not one of them is qualified to do what God is asking that individual to do. (In a sense, we’re all unqualified.) God goes to great pains to pick the unqualified. If you were starting a nation, would you pick a woman past menopause and a man a hundred years old? That doesn’t seem sensible, but that’s what God did. The message is clear. If you think you’re qualified, you might believe you did a good job. If you know you’re unqualified, you realize you can only accomplish something because you’re empowered by God.”

People who think they always know exactly what God is doing in this world and who the people are who are doing God’s work need to hear again what the prophet Isaiah had to say about God: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Jesus said to his disciples, “Do not forbid him.” Take a wide view of your faith instead of a narrow one. The followers of Jesus are not to be a little clique off in a corner fenced in. The Kingdom of God has the dimensions of God. Do not look for labels or membership cards. Look for actions, attitudes, and spirit.

It’s the testimony of the Bible that God often works in surprising ways and through people or movements we might least expect. These words of Jesus then are a rebuke to all our blind exclusiveness, our arrogant assumptions that God’s actions in the world are limited to the forms with which we are familiar.

But there are false prophets always among us. What then are some of the ways in which we can distinguish the true from the false? Some of the usual tests we might use for other enterprises are not sufficient. Merely because a group claims to have a special revelation from God and is fast-growing and quite successful for a time as far as raising money, is not a test of its truth. That does not prove it is doing God’s work.

One test is this: Is the group merciful and compassionate not only to its own members, but to others outside of it as well? Jesus said over and over again, “You will know them by their fruits.” Do the people within the group “love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with their God?”

St. Paul said, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Paul was saying, “If God’s Spirit truly dwells within you or within a group, this is the kind of person you will be and the kind of group it will be.”

A second test is this: It is the witness of the Bible that God’s Spirit calls us to wholeness and to seeing the world and the creation as whole, as being interdependent, as working toward harmony. Therefore, true religion is that in which the followers do their best to love their enemies and treat all people, even those who disagree with them, with respect.

On the other hand, it is the witness of the Bible that those movements and individuals, religious or otherwise, that would lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, and dogmatism are not of God’s Spirit, but false. Any movement or religion, for example, that teaches that one race is the master race and is to rule over all others is not of God’s Spirit.

A third test is this: It is the witness of the Bible and our Christian faith that life is good and God’s creation is good, and it is to be enjoyed, but not wasted or plundered. True religion teaches a reverence for life and for the total environment. Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” This means that true religion is that which fills one’s life with joy, wonder, and mystery. We are joyful because we know that this is ultimately God’s creation and that God loves us and the whole world. And we know that all things work together for the good for those who love God.

A fourth test: True religion leads individuals and groups away from self-centeredness. We are drawn out of ourselves into harmony and service with others. A person who is filled with true religion is one in whom there is victory over self-centered habits that we have been a slave to. True religion leads to healthy human relationships.

A fifth test: True religion has a tolerance for ambiguity. The Apostle Paul said that when we realize we don’t know it all, that is a sign of spiritual maturity. “For now we see in a mirror dimly.” If we claim that we have the whole truth and nothing but the truth, our problem is spiritual arrogance, which leads to false religion. God and God’s ways are a mystery that can never be completely understood by our finite minds. Whenever I meet a person who says, “I always know exactly what God wants me to do,” a flag goes up in my mind. And then if the person goes on to say, “I know exactly what God wants you to do,” a bigger flag goes up.

Remember above all the ultimate test — According to Jesus, God will not ask us, “Who was your favorite guru?” or “Did you take the Bible literally or seriously?” or “Were you truly born again?” or “Did you belong to the right church?” Jesus said, “The way you treat the least of these among my sisters and brothers, that is the outcasts, the down-and-out, the poor, the homeless, the retarded, the crippled, those in prison, is the way you treat God.” According to Jesus, that’s the criterion God is going to use in evaluating our lives and in determining whether we have been following a false religion or a true religion. Amen.