Sunday, September 25, 1994
IT'S GOD'S CHOICE, NOT OURS
Mark 9:38-41

Here's a short bit of poetry I've always appreciated:

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 everyone showed stunned surprise —
Not one expected me.

Over and over again, Jesus in the New Testament reminds us that there are always many surprises in God's choices. One of my most embarrassing moments took place years ago when I was back visiting a congregation 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 who I remembered as being one of my chief critics, "How's your wife, Eileen?" He quickly answered, "Oh, she's in heaven." Not thinking about what I was saying or how it might sound, I said, "I'm sorry." Then I quickly realized by the pained expression on his face that he had taken my comment 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."

Since then, the more I've thought about it, my last remark about being surprised, like the poem quoted earlier, was good Christian theology. It says that if any one of us pretends to know completely what God is doing or who is doing God's work, we will be surprised.

More than that, some of us are even so bold as to think we have a monopoly on God's workings in this world and that unless we grant the license or award the franchise or give our permission, God's work will not take place.

Perhaps that's why 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 and believe they have a corner on the market. Of course, this happens in the business world too. We can come to believe that God works only through us or through those we license or authorize. This happened to the original disciples of Jesus, and it can happen to us. We forget that God frequently chooses people or groups we would not choose to do God's work in this world.

That's what the story from the Gospel according to Mark is all about. The disciples had been with Jesus for some time. They had witnessed his healing of the sick and the casting out of evil spirits. They too had had some success in doing such things and some failures as well. Overall, however, they were feeling quite proud of their preferred status. Jesus was becoming well known, and some of his fame, as I said last week, had rubbed off on them. They were part of the inner circle. They expected to have privileged positions in the coming reign of God.

As last week's sermon also pointed out, they had even had some discussions among themselves as to which one of them was the greatest, number one. Jesus found out about that discussion and told them, "If anyone would be first among you, that one must be last of all and servant of all."

But they forgot what Jesus said 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 even applied for a temporary license. He doesn't have a membership card as one of your approved agents.

They could've gone on to say — he hasn't been baptized in the only correct way and more than that, when he was baptized, the one doing it didn't use the right words, and we're not sure that he has the correct theology.

It still happens today. One of the most ludicrous examples of this appeared in a story not long ago. A minister or priest, I've forgotten which, in trying to use more inclusive language, baptized a child by saying, as we do here, "I baptize you in the name of God our Creator, Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit." It was reported to one of his superiors in the hierarchy, who then said the baptism was not valid because he did not use the right words, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." What nonsense.

It's possible too that 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 in trying to stop this individual, 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 or licensed or monopolized by any one person or group or religion. The Spirit of God is much more far-reaching and certainly less picky than we can ever imagine. Trying to shackle the power of God is not only a very un-Godly thing to do, it is impossible for anyone who would be so ridiculous as to try. God did not create us or the church so that we could control where and how divine power for good can be used.

God has not given an exclusive contract to one brand of Christianity or to any one denomination or even to the Christian church as a whole. God's work is carried on in the world in many different ways and sometimes by people who aren't even aware they are doing God's work.

A few weeks back, a member of our congregation gave me an article to read about Mahatma Gandhi of India, which she had written some years ago. I was reminded once again that although Gandhi did not claim to be a Christian (he was Hindu), yet in some ways he was more Christian than many of us who worship and preach regularly. 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 of him. Do not try to stop him. Those who are not against us

are for us. Don't worry about labels. More than that, maybe you will even learn something from him."

Like the early disciples, we too can easily become exclusive and think that no one else is doing 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."

There are many stories in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible that tell us that God frequently chooses people we would not choose to carry on God's mission in the world. These words of Jesus 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 or we license. I believe that Jesus is also implying in this story that there is no one line that we can step over and say, "Now I'm a fully mature Christian." We are all at different points in our spiritual journey, and we have a great deal we can learn from each other. And we're never at a point where 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. In other places in the New Testament, Jesus warns that there are always false prophets and counterfeit religious movements at work among us. 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 repeats 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."

What then are some of the ways in which we can distinguish the false prophets from the true? Some of the tests we might be tempted to use from other enterprises are not sufficient. Merely because a group claims to have a special revelation from God and is fast-growing and seems very successful for a time is not a test of its truth.

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 wrote, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." Paul was saying, "If God's Spirit is truly working in you or within a group, this is the kind of person 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 testimony of the Bible that those movements and individuals, religious or

otherwise, which lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, and dogmatism are not of God's Spirit but false. Any movement or religion, for example, which 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 God's Spirit working in and among us fills our lives 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. We know that nothing can separate us from the love of God and that all things work together for the good for those who love God. That's good news.

A fourth test: God's Spirit leads individuals and groups away from self-centeredness. We are drawn out of ourselves into service for others. A person in whom God's Spirit is at work is one in whom there is victory over self-centered habits that he or she has been a slave to. God's Spirit working in us leads to healthy human relationships. We become forgiving and loving people.

A fifth test: God's Spirit working in and through us leads to humility, and this means we have 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. He wrote, "For now we see in a mirror dimly." If we claim we have the whole truth and nothing but the truth, our problem is spiritual arrogance and self-righteousness.

God and God's ways are mysteries that can never be completely understood by our finite minds. Whenever I meet an individual who says, "I always know exactly what God wants me to do and what God's will is in every situation," a flag goes up in my mind. And if that 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 one day ask us, "Who was your favorite guru, or did you take the Bible literally, or were you truly born again, or did you belong to the right church?"

Rather, God will ask, "How did 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, those in prison? The way you treat people is the way you treat God."

Above all, prepare to be surprised. There are many people today doing God's work in the world that we do not recognize. You can be sure of this: those who are doing God's work are the happiest and most joyful people of all. Amen.