Sunday, October 1, 2000
DO NOT STOP HIM!
Mark 9:38-41

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. A church congregation or a particular denomination or a sectarian movement can come to believe and teach that God works primarily or even only through it or through those it authorizes. This happened to the 12 disciples, and it happens today.

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 some success in doing such things and no doubt some failures. Overall, though, they thought of themselves as having preferred status. Their teacher was becoming well-known, and some of his fame was hopefully rubbing 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 of them was the greatest.

As I noted in last week's sermon, Jesus found out about that conversation and told them, "If anyone would be first among you, that one must be the last of all and servant of all."

But they evidently forgot that warning rather quickly. One day, not long after that discussion about who was the greatest, 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 is not part of our group."

Here's a paraphrase: "Teacher, we came across this guy healing people. He was telling them and others that he was one of your followers, but we never saw him before. He didn't take the course we offer on 'Introductory Healing.' He has not been approved by you or us. We told him to stop doing it. We can't have people running around the countryside healing folks in your name without our or your permission." They could have gone on to say, "He hasn't been baptized using the proper formula, or maybe he doesn't have the correct theology."

It could also be that the disciples were 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 telling this man to stop, but Jesus surprised them with his quick answer. "Do not stop him! Whoever is not against us is for us. This individual is doing a good thing. He is helping people. It doesn't matter if he is an 'official' follower of mine or not."

He could've added, as he did in the parable of the sheep and the goats, "There are people everywhere who are feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and those in prison, clothing the naked, and welcoming the stranger, and they don't even know they are doing it in my name or that in doing what they are doing, they are doing it to me as well."

Jesus, it seems, was not especially interested in a process to officially certify people as his representatives. In today's church terms, he was not worried about whether or not a minister or priest had been ordained by a bishop who claimed to be in the apostolic succession. He was

not concerned whether or not you were baptized by immersion, by sprinkling, or maybe even not baptized at all.

This story teaches us an important lesson. God's Spirit at work in the world cannot be controlled, fenced in, authorized, licensed, or franchised by any one group, religion, denomination, or congregation. God has not given an exclusive contract or monopoly to one brand of Christianity, or even to Christianity itself. This story is a reminder that God's Spirit is working in many different ways in this world and in the creation as a whole, sometimes by people who aren't even aware they are doing God's work.

This story always makes me remember Mahatma Gandhi in India. He did not claim to be a Christian. He was Hindu. But in some ways, he was more Christ-like than many of us who worship or preach selfless love, work for justice, promote non-violent compassion, and seek freedom. I am convinced that Jesus would've said of Gandhi what he said about the man in this story who was healing people: "Do not stop him! Work alongside him. Maybe you will even learn something from him."

We human beings are always so concerned about setting up barriers in this world. We would rather exclude than include. We want control. If you are not in my group and do not do things exactly the way I say, you are doomed to hell.

In one of those jokes that's been floating around the internet, a man is walking across a bridge and preparing to jump off. Another man runs over to him and shouts, "Stop! Don't do it." "Why not?" the guy on the ledge asks. "I have nothing to live for." "Sure you do," the concerned citizen replies. "Are you religious or are you an atheist?"

"Religious," the man responds. "Me too," the rescuer says. "Are you Christian or Buddhist?"
"Christian," he answers. "Me too. Are you Catholic or Protestant?"
"Protestant," the potential suicide replies. "Me too. Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"
"Baptist," he answers. "Me too. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"
"Baptist Church of God."
"What an amazing coincidence, me too. Can't you see how much you have to live for? Are you Original Baptist Church of God or Reformed Baptist Church of God?"
"Reformed Baptist Church of God," comes the reply.
"Amazing," the potential rescuer says. "Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879 or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?"
Now the fellow threatening suicide is starting to feel a little better. "I belong to the Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915."
At that, the rescuer is enraged. He screams, "Die, heretic, die!" and runs to the side of the bridge and pushes him off.

Do you really believe that God cares whether or not you belong to the Roman Catholic Church, the United Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, or some form of Baptist Church?

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 am a complete Christian." We are all at different stages in our spiritual development, at different points on our spiritual journey, and we have a great deal we can learn from each other.

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 genuine. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus warns 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 says, "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."

While there are ways in which we can tell the difference between true religion and false religion, let's admit that we can become too exclusive and believe that no one 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 are not practicing your religion the way we do." I've heard other Christians say to someone, "You can't be a true spokesperson for God. You didn't graduate from the right seminary."

Not only in religion is this an issue, but it occurs in other aspects of life as well. The spirit of narrow sectarianism is familiar enough in literature, and the "do not follow us" mentality has been sternly reprimanded by the authorities of the time.

In the church, we hear it all the time: "Unless you are 'born again' in the same way that I was 'born again,' you are not truly a Christian." Or, "Unless you take exactly the same view of the Bible that I do, you are not a true believer."

I like what the writer 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.' The Bible is both fact and 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. 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."

"Do not stop him," Jesus said to his disciples. Take a wide view of your faith and the way in which God works in the world. 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 is the testimony of the Bible that God often works in surprising ways and through people or movements we might least expect. "Do not stop him." These words of Jesus are a rebuke to all our blind exclusiveness and our arrogant assumptions that God's activity in the world is limited to the form with which we are familiar.

But there are false teachers among us. Merely because a group is fast-growing and has quite a few members 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? Jesus said over and over again, “You will know them by their fruits.” Do the people in the group “love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with their God?” Paul wrote, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control.”

A second test is this: it is the witness of the Bible that God’s Spirit calls us to wholeness, to seeing the world and creation as interconnected, as working toward harmony. 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.

A third test is this: it is the witness of the Bible that life is good, and God’s creation is good and is to be enjoyed, but not wasted or plundered. True religion teaches a reverence for life and for the total environment. Where God’s Spirit is, there is joy, wonder, and mystery.

A fourth test: when God’s Spirit is at work among us, we are led away from self-centeredness. We are drawn out of ourselves into harmony and service to others.

A fifth test: true religion has a tolerance for ambiguity. When you realize you don’t know it all, that is a sign of spiritual maturity. “For now we see in a mirror dimly.” The belief that you know all the truth leads to spiritual arrogance and false religion.

Remember above all the ultimate test according to Jesus. God does not ask you, “Who is your favorite guru?” or “Do you take the Bible literally?” or “Are you truly born again?” or “Do you belong to the right church?” Rather, God is continually asking you, “How are you treating the least of these who are your sisters and brothers?”

I believe the man the disciples tried to stop passed these tests. That’s why Jesus told his disciples, “Do not stop him!” Then he had some additional words for the disciples which we did not read as part of the scripture lesson, and now I’m paraphrasing: “Instead of trying to determine all the time ‘who’s in or who’s out,’ the real problem is with those of you who do not live up to the standards of the faith. Instead of always worrying about what others are doing, take a look at yourself.” Amen.