Sunday, September 28, 2003
**IT'S GOD'S CHOICE**
Mark 9:38-41

One of the most alluring and destructive temptations of religious movements is that their adherents tend to become exclusive and arrogant. Followers of the Christian way are no exception. A church congregation, a particular denomination, or a sectarian movement can come to believe and teach that God works primarily through it or only through those it authorizes.

Instead of acknowledging that God's Spirit might be working through those you want to exclude because they do not have the right beliefs — which usually means the same beliefs as you have — you divide the world into "us" and "them." Some who call themselves Christians haven't even reserved this distinction for those of other religions. They're intolerant of any deviation from their own denominational party lines.

It is tragic that Christians are able to display so little unity and inclusion among and within themselves. Over two-thirds of the world's Christians are Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic, and yet they and we, as Protestants, have very little to do with each other. Frequently a wedding is planned between a Catholic and a Protestant where one would not be allowed to participate in the rite and sacrament of the other. The same is true of funerals and other church liturgies.

A few years ago, the father of my oldest daughter's husband died here in Lincoln. My son-in-law and his mother, the wife of the deceased, wanted me to participate in the funeral service being held in a church of another denomination here in Lincoln. However, they discovered, to their dismay, that my participation was not allowed by that Protestant denomination, although I'm convinced the local pastor of that congregation could've received permission to deviate from the official party line if he had asked. Finally, it was decided that I could make a brief statement about the deceased before the official liturgy of the funeral service began. So I did that. In that church's worship tradition, you know the official religious service is underway when the minister says, "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." For a brief moment, I was tempted to begin my brief statement with those words. I wonder what would've happened if I had done so.

Through the years, I've participated in many discussions on how Christians could work together with each other more effectively and with people of other religions. In one meeting, one person asked, "Do we have to work with the Presbyterians — I just barely escaped being one." Another person said, "I think this is good, but I really don't want to be included with those German Lutherans."

There's an old truth that says, "The greatest differences in the world are never between people who believe different things, but between people who believe the same things and differ in their interpretation." Many of those knocking on doors and sending missionaries overseas remain convinced that their version of the church is the only true church.

This exclusive understanding of salvation has its comforts. It allows you to feel special, righteous, and part of the "in" crowd. This happened to the early disciples, and it takes place today.

According to the gospel story in Mark, 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 some failures. Overall, however, they were feeling quite proud of what they thought of as their preferred status. Their teacher was becoming well known, and some of his fame was 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 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 the last of all and servant of all.”

Evidently, they forgot that discussion rather quickly. Only a few days later, the disciple named John came to Jesus and proudly reported on behalf of all of them, “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 my paraphrase: “Teacher, we came across this guy healing people. He was telling them that he was one of your followers, but we never saw him before. He didn’t take the course you offer on ‘introductory healing.’ He has not been officially 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 your or our permission.” They could’ve gone on to say, “He hasn’t been baptized using the proper formula, or maybe he’s not baptized at all, and we’re not sure he has the correct beliefs.”

It could also be that the disciples were envious of this person’s success because not long before this incident, they had tried to heal someone and had failed. Although the story in Mark’s gospel indicates the individual who was healing people was a man, suppose for a moment it had been a woman. That would’ve really upset them. Consider how many centuries it has taken for women to be allowed to be ordained ministers, and in some branches of the Christian faith, they are still prohibited.

The disciples thought they were taking appropriate action in telling this individual to stop. However, 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 whether or not he is an official follower.”

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 and for me.” In another place, he said, “I have many sheep who are not of this fold.”

It seems that Jesus was not especially interested in a process to officially certify people who are doing God’s work. 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 or by sprinkling, or perhaps not even baptized at all.

He was teaching his disciples and all of us a valuable lesson. God’s Spirit at work in the world cannot be controlled or fenced in or authorized or 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. God has the freedom to work when and where God desires. It is not your choice. You cannot limit God's freedom.

The story is a powerful reminder that God's Spirit is working in many different ways in this world and in creation as a whole, sometimes through people you would least expect and also by people who aren't even aware they are doing God's work.

This story always causes me to 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 who claim to be "followers of the way." He taught us much about the power of selfless love, about working for justice, about non-violent compassion, and about freedom. I am convinced 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 putting up barriers in this world. We would rather exclude than include. We want control. We always are trying to determine who is "out" and who is "in." A journalist once asked Carl Sandburg, "What is the ugliest word in the English language?" After a few minutes, Sandburg replied, "exclusive." The ugliness of "exclusive" depends on whether you see yourself as being among the included or the excluded. People pride themselves on being members of exclusive clubs, living in exclusive neighborhoods, dining at exclusive restaurants, and belonging to exclusive churches. Some churches like to say, "You can't take communion here because you're not one of us." "You can't belong to this church unless you are baptized by the right method."

The first major conflict in the early church centered on the question of who is in and who is out. Are Gentiles to be included? Peter and Paul debated that issue until Peter had a dream and concluded that God shows no partiality.

For you or anyone else to claim that you can judge whether or not God has accepted some person or rejected them is to misunderstand the gift of God's grace. The disciples who tried to stop the man who was not officially in their group misunderstood God's grace. Rather than being grateful that people were healed, they were upset because the healing was done through someone outside their group.

What is easy to forget is that God has a history of acting decisively in and through people you consider outsiders. Jesus, the incarnation of God's Spirit, refused to abide by the divisions and barriers of his time. He challenged the practice of trying to limit the grace of God to one's own race, religious institution, or any one group of people.

In one of those jokes that's been floating through the internet, a man is walking across a bridge and meets another man standing on the edge who is preparing to jump. He runs over to him and shouts, "Stop. Don't do it." "Why not?" the guy about to jump 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 answers. "Me too," replies the rescuer. "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. “So am I.” “Are you Baptist Church of God, or Baptist Church of the Lord?” The man about to jump says, “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,” came 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. Maybe he’s found a friend. “I belong to the Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915.” At that answer, 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, or the United Presbyterian Church, or the United Methodist Church, or the Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?

“Do not stop him,” Jesus said to the disciples. Take a wide view of your faith and the way in which God’s grace works. “Do not stop him.” These words of Jesus are a repudiation of all our blind exclusiveness and our arrogant assumptions that God’s Spirit and activity in the world are limited to the forms and the people with whom we are familiar.

Dear friends, hear these words about God’s grace. God’s Spirit is at work in places you least expect. There is nothing you can do to limit God’s grace. There is nothing you can do that will make God love you and others more. There is nothing you can do which will make God love you and other people less. Poor choices, those made by you and those made by others, can bring lots of trouble into your life, but they cannot force God to stop loving you or anyone else. It is God’s choice. Amen.