

Whose Side Are You On?

Mark 9:38-50

September 27, 2009

The preacher at a city-wide revival meeting was an enthusiastic United Methodist. He asked those gathered one night, "How many of you are United Methodists?" and then asked them to stand.

Most of the people there stood. But there was this one little old lady near the front who did not. The preacher singled her out and asked, "Ma'm, what are you?"

The woman meekly answered, "Presbyterian."

"And why are you Presbyterian?" the minister challenged.

"Well, my grandfather was a Presbyterian, my father was a Presbyterian and my husband was a Presbyterian" she answered.

The preacher smelled a kill and shouted his next question so everyone could hear: "Well, suppose that your grandfather and father and all your relatives had been morons; what would that make you?"

The woman thought for a moment and then innocently answered: "Oh, I see. I would be a United Methodist."

Two ministers, each convinced of his own denomination's superiority, were engaged in good-natured conversation. "Who's really to say who is the better," commented one. "After all, we both do the Lord's work."

"Yes," said the other with a twinkle in his eye, "You do it in your way, and I in his."

A man was walking across a bridge when he came across another man standing very near the edge obviously about to jump. The first man shouted "Stop! Are you a Christian?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am," the man answered.

"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?"

The man answered, "Reformed Baptist, reformation of 1915."

At which point the first man said, "Die you heretic," and pushed the other man off the bridge.¹

Gordon Melton has done quite a bit of research and estimates that there are over 33,000 denominations of Christianity in the world. While there are not nearly that many in the United States he's discovered some pretty interesting ones. "The Church of the Kennedy Worshipers" is a group that believes praying to the late John F. Kennedy cures persons of congenital defects and terminal diseases.

"The Church of the Ministry of Universal Wisdom" is looking for flying saucers.

There are more than a hundred varieties of Baptist churches. A partial list includes: Northern Baptists, Southern Baptists, General Baptists, Particular Baptists, Seventh-day Baptists, Hard Shell Baptists, Free Will Baptists, Duck River, Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists.

Now, Baptists aren't the only ones with some interesting splits. A group broke off from the Church of God and called itself The True Church of God and then a group split from them and called itself The Only True Church of God.²

We laugh – the stories are funny – and yet, they are oh, so sad. Whether all these stories are true or not, they reveal a truth we know – we are not exempt from narrowness of thought. Denomination after

denomination forms because some idea – some belief – becomes so important to a segment of a church that they simply can no longer worship, share communion with those who don't see things the same way. Someone gets upset about something and goes off and starts their own church. Turf wars some call them. They can be pretty petty.

People believing they have a corner on the truth is not really a new problem though in Christianity. Today's story is of the time Jesus and his disciples were walking around Capernaum and John, the disciple Jesus loved, went up to Jesus and reported that someone was casting out demons in his name who wasn't part of their group. Because he had not been trained like the rest of them – called like the rest of them – they wanted to push him off the bridge – stop him from helping others become whole.

Jesus' response? "Don't stop him." The disciples were probably expecting Jesus to affirm them for their attempt at keeping things neat and clean when it came to who was approved to promote kingdom work. They thought they were doing something good for the movement and instead they discovered Jesus had other thoughts on the matter. They wanted to control the movement – limit who could promote it, who could perform ministry. They wanted to keep things orderly.

Jesus had other thoughts – saw things differently – had a different perception of the way things should or could be. The disciples still couldn't comprehend how far Jesus' teachings were going to take them – the doors that were going to be opened as a result of him and their future ministry. They still did not understand that this movement was for the world and not just a Jewish reform movement – that Gentiles and Greeks were going to be included.

The disciples still saw themselves as a uniquely-endowed, specially selected group with a corner on the kingdom – an exclusive club with rights and special abilities and perhaps privileges. But, Jesus didn't see it that way. He once again tried to expand their definition of what it meant to follow him. He wanted them to accept people who didn't express their faith in the same way they did. He wanted them to see themselves as part of an ever-growing network of followers. He wanted them to understand that membership in this network is not determined by special privilege or unique gifts – but is based on serving. Jesus Christ is too big to be restricted by one denomination, one culture, one nationality.

Whose side you are on isn't determined by whether you are a member of this denomination or another denomination - whether you believe a certain element should be in every worship service or not. It's determined by who passes out cups of water. That's what Jesus said. "Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

Whose side you are on is determined by whether you are serving – on Jesus' side if you are serving – not on his side if you're not serving. Who's in are those who offer water – those who show kindness – those who advocate for the downtrodden, the dispossessed, the poor, the outsiders, the victims – the little ones. The whole rest of today's reading fairly bristles with conviction and passionate appeal for being concerned about the little ones and not leading them astray or denying them our kindnesses – our help. It's not about correct theology – similar theology – but how we treat little ones.

Jesus called the early disciples and calls us in this day to expand our understanding of his grace and love. Carl Sandburg was once asked by a journalist what the ugliest word in the English language was. Sandburg thought for a moment and then offered, "exclusive." Of course, it depends on whether we are among the excluded or the included whether we see it as ugly. We like it when we are members in exclusive clubs, neighborhoods, restaurants, vacation resorts, churches. There's a sense of pride and security that comes from being among the insiders. But, most of us have been excluded enough to know how ugly the word, the reality, can be. It hurts when we are among the marginalized, the rejected, the pushed-aside or the left-out.

In the early church there was a movement to exclude – to exclude the gentiles. Peter and Paul debated it for a long time. Peter finally had a dream and as a result came to the belief that God isn't partial. As a result

the early church began to break down barriers between people and push aside the previous margins they felt it necessary to create.³

John Killinger offered in the conclusion of a sermon of his: “It’s an exciting thought that when we die and come into the presence of God and all its fullness, it will not be our major achievements that speak for us, ‘He was president of a bank – she was the first woman senator from her state – he was the author of 22 books,’ but the small apparently inconsequential things that we long ago forgot. ‘He mowed my lawn when I was sick. She cared for my child when I went to the market. He sent me flowers when I needed them most. She washed and mended my socks.’ These are the little things that hold the world together. They are the small stones that comprise the great cathedrals where God is worshiped. They shall be remembered,” says Killinger, “like stars in the crown of the saints.”⁴

Western Oregon University and Central Washington University were playing a softball game. It was a playoff game. Sara Tucholsky of Western Oregon University was up to bat. With two on and one strike, Sara did what she had never done before – she hit a home run. As she rounded first base, she missed it. When she turned to go back and touch it, she twisted her knee. Hurt so severely she had to crawl back to first base. If her teammates helped her, she would be called out. A pinch runner could replace her but her home run would become a single.

That’s when it happened. The first base player of the opposing Central Washington University team, Mallory Holtman, asked the umpire if she and her teammates could help Sara. The umpire said there was nothing in the rules against it. So Holtman and shortstop Liz Wallace put their arms under Sara’s legs and she put her arms over their shoulders. The three players headed around the bases, stopping to let Sara touch each base with her good leg. The three-run homer would count.

Now, sports fans, here’s the rest of the story – that act of sportsmanship contributed to the elimination of Central Washington University from the playoffs. There was a price for their compassion – for their offering of a cup of water.⁵

A famous church leader was in South India some time back when he heard a story from one of the pastors there about an old man who was Hindu. There was a polluted well in the old man’s village. He had lived all of his life with this polluted well. Most of the people in his community were sick much of the time.

There came a day when Christian missionaries went to the village. These missionaries were concerned about both the personal and social well-being of the villagers. So, besides speaking about Christ, they dug a good well for the people. They left after doing what they could there.

After they left, Hindu government officials went to the village and asked about the influence of the missionaries. They asked the old man, who lived in a shanty, if the missionaries had tried to convert him to Christ. The old man assured them that they had not.

The officials were about to leave his shanty when they noticed a newspaper picture of Jesus hanging on the wall. When they saw the picture they again questioned the old man. “What do you mean they didn’t try to convert you? Why do you have the picture of Jesus on your wall?”

The old man explained that he had gone down into the village to buy some fish a few days earlier and the merchant had wrapped the fish in an old newspaper that contained the picture of Jesus. He explained that when he saw the picture, he put it on his wall.

Again the officials queried him, “Why have you hung the picture if you are not a Christian?”

The old man said, “I had to put it there; it was because of that man that I was given clean water to drink.”⁶

Effective evangelism isn’t about getting people to make the correct affirmation. It’s about offering cups of cold water because someone is in need of the cold water. The disciples wanted, expected, Jesus to affirm them as the official representatives of kingdom work. They believed they had a corner on the trademark and there was danger in others infringing on what was rightfully theirs. Jesus would have none of it. He said those

on his side are those who are compassionate – those who are kind – those who offer help to those in need. So, whose side are you on?

Let us pray.

1. Brett C. Blair, “Be At Peace With One Another,” www.esermons.com, ChristianGlobe Network, 2003, 0-0000-0000-01.
2. John Ortberg, Everybody’s Normal Until You Get to Know Them (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003) as quoted in King Duncan’s sermon, “Can’t We All Just Get Along?” www.sermons.com, ChristianGlobe Network, 0-000-0000-20.
3. Bishop Kenneth Carter, “Unexclusive Gospel,” article in The Christian Century, 1997.
4. John Kilinger, “The Great Importance of Little Deeds,” as quoted by King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.sermons.com.
5. Billy Strayhorn, <http://www.epulpit.net/080810.htm> as quoted in King Duncan’s “Can’t We All Just Get Along?”
6. William H. Hinson, A Place to Dig (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), as quoted in King Duncan’s “About Other Denominations,” Collected Sermons, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.