

Sermon Text: Mark 9:38-50

Some readings in our Bible, upon first reading, are difficult, and in some, like today's, on second, third, and fourth, they are difficult. We'll try to make sense of the reading for us today.

As I approach this brief message, I'm reminded that a few years back I was once offered the opportunity to serve, and some of you know of this mission, at Redbird Mission in Kentucky. Now, it is way up in the hills. I investigated what it was like, and I talked to a former pastor who was there for several years, and he told me a story to give me a feel for Redbird Mission. He said that shortly after he arrived some of his well-meaning members came to the parsonage and said, "Preacher, the Baptist pastor down the hill is talking you down. You want us to take care of him?" That happened. That gave me a flavor. On the one hand, I thought what loyalty to their pastor! I've never had a hit squad before. That might be dangerous. On the other hand, what a perversion of unity under Christ. What abnegation of the great commission! Christians have fought and died over manufactured theological walls for millennia, and of course, some few things really do matter, but the majority of the hairs that we split do not. I am slowly narrowing my theology down to what Paul said to the Corinthians. He said, "For I have decided to know nothing among you except Christ and Him crucified." I want to add to that what the children sang, "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so." That would be just about enough theology.

To illustrate the divisiveness on this World Communion Sunday in which we think of the great commission and all those everywhere who claim Christ, I'm going to tell a story that's one of my favorites. I've told it before. Indulge me. It illustrates perfectly. Emau Phillips said this. He said, "I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge ready to jump, and so I ran over, and I said stop, don't do it!" He said, "Why shouldn't I?" I said, "Well, there's so much to live for." He said, "Like what?" I said, "Well, are you religious or atheist?" He said, "Religious." I said, "Me, too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?" He said, "Christian." I said, "Me, too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Wow, me, too!" Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?" He said, "Baptist Church of God." I said, "Me, too! Are you original Baptist Church of God or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?" He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God." He's perking up a little bit. I said, "Me, too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God Reformation of 1879 or Reformed Baptist Church of God Reformation of 1915?" He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God Reformation of 1915." So I said, "Die, heretic scum!" and pushed him off.

We can be so close, and then allow things to divide us. The disciples, if you read this carefully, wanted to get rid of some borderline people, who were using Jesus' name, but they weren't proper. Jesus said don't sweat it, whoever is not against us is for us.

In my first church, there was an older woman who was kin to the founders, and she was famous for asking visitors, "What are you doing here? Who invited you? Who told you

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, October 1, 2006

could come in here? That’s my pew.” She was famous for that. You can imagine they didn’t take in very many new members. She clearly had the mindset that if you were not born here then you do not belong here. The disciples were dangerously close to that kind of thinking.

Now, in the current war on terror, the motto is a worldly one, “If you are not for us, you are against us.” Maybe wars have to be that way. In Jesus’ spiritual struggle against unrighteousness and sin, Jesus did things the other way around. He said, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” The disciples even still wanted to build a wall and push these other people away. Jesus said, “No, don’t do that. If these outsiders are doing anything real in my name, they will not later be able to speak ill of me. If they experience real power to heal, to change and make whole, then they will soon be one of us. Do not discourage these little ones.” That means little faiths. That means almost, these little, almost Christians. Don’t discourage them just because they have not followed as far as you have. Leave them. Let us wait and see.

I’m reminded of Psalm 34, “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good.” Let these folks feed on the Gospel for awhile and get the taste of it, and find out it’s real, and find out it heals, and find out that it’s good, it is indeed of God, and you guys, you guys be nice to them while they’re finding that out. The welcoming in of sinners and outsiders has been too often replaced in our churches by the conceit that we are already good, already chosen, and isn’t God lucky to have us. Maybe that’s why on a week-to-week basis in worship, we have given up weekly confession because confession is for sinners, and sinners are those other people. That’s other people. We are church folks! What do we have to confess?

So many things in religion get distorted over time. For example, grace, unmerited, unearned love and forgiveness is the good news of the Gospel, but somehow among theologians, election has become a big buzzword and grace has come in second place. Focusing on me as an elect, as being one of God’s chosen, has too often bred elitism, a self-importance, and everything but the humility, a complete dependence upon God’s grace alone. Our hope is in the open-armed grace that Jesus shows today in this reading and in the cross where he died, not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world! For whomsoever will come. Yes, you and I are especially beloved by God in Christ, but the offer to you is also to the whole world so let’s not build walls that Jesus died to destroy. In Christ there is neither male nor female says the Apostle Paul, neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, in Christ we are one.

Our calling is one – to go and make disciples, not stay and build up walls. Go, Jesus said, go and bring in new disciples, even the little faiths, or the mature transfers, some who know only that there is power in Jesus’ name and little else.

In communion, we recognize that the table is God’s, the invitation is God’s, and all are welcome. As far as confession, I’m drawn back to Psalm 51, as we approach the table, the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, Oh God, thou wilt not despise. All who come in humility and in repentance will meet God here. All who know their need of a Savior, and accept that God was in Christ making peace by the blood of His

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, October 1, 2006

cross, will find brothers and sisters here. Jesus said in John, “Truly I say unto to you, he who believes has eternal life.” Again, He said, “I am the bread of life.”

It is God’s gracious will to give us the kingdom, to give us forgiveness, to give us new life, and to give us life eternal. How dare disciples of old or disciples today build walls where God in Christ has come to earth to give Himself and His love and His grace to whomsoever will come. It is not our job to build hurdles and hedgerows. It is our job to extend the invitation outside the walls. The Gospel is not about who is greater. The Gospel is about God’s grace.

The disciples’ attitude seemed to anger Jesus. We would hope not to anger Jesus with our understanding of the Gospel. If we are exclusive and pushing those out who would come, then we, too, deserve anger and wrath. Do we offer hope? Do we extend Jesus’ invitation? Or do we smugly climb into God’s chair and presume to judge who is in and who is out? Jesus is not asking us to take Him literally when He speaks of gouging out eyes and cutting off hands and feet, but He is asking us to take Him seriously. He certainly had their attention. The way we welcome or exclude can hurt the cause of Christ, and that’s what Jesus is trying to tell His disciples and us in this story. He seems to be saying that there’s no excuse, if you want to be part of me, then you cannot be part of anything that diminishes the faith or drives away another human being. It would be better to break up our own bodies, He is saying, than to break up the body of Christ.

Salt preserves what is good. Salt was a preservative, like salt ham. Salt is what we are supposed to be for the earth. To preserve what is good as Christians, preserve what is Godly as Christians, to preserve what is good, so we shouldn’t sweat that others are not as far along as we are. We should keep an eye on our own hearts, and if we want to be picky and judge and cast things out, then we will find plenty of things to judge and cast out within us. Let us only preserve within ourselves what is good, and live out what is good, and be welcoming, and extend the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Edwin Markham has a poem with which I’m going to close. It says, “He drew a circle to shut me out. Heretic! Rubble! A thing to flout! But love and I had the wit to win. We drew a circle that took him in.” That’s the good news of our faith. God has drawn a circle that includes us in. Our religion is not one of exclusion, but one of inclusion, and even at this table we are about to approach, as Charles Wesley said – speaking of communion – he wrote in his hymn, “Come sinners to the Gospel feast, Ye need not one be left behind for God hath bidden all humankind.”

No one is excluded. All are welcome whether members of this congregation or not, all are welcome. If you come humbly seeking God, God on some level will meet you here. You are invited to the Lord’s table. It is His table. It is His invitation. It is His grace that we rejoice in today. Amen.