



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 21, SEPTEMBER 26, 2021,
ESTHER 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; PSALM 124; JAMES 5:13-20; MARK 9:38-50

GRACE TO INCLUDE INSTEAD OF FEAR OF LOSS

Mark 9:38-50 *[John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 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. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. "For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."*

We've just heard these words twice in the Gospel reading. The disciples want to know if the name of Christ needs a closer definition to serve as a boundary between themselves and the others who are not part of the coming kingdom. Jesus says, "No. It is enough." Then he goes further and says that not only somebody who calls in his name to heal, but even if, perhaps tentatively, those were to

help Jesus' followers just a bit, because they are following this Messiah will be included. The name of Christ, it would seem, is grace to include; it does not feed a fear of loss.

So this is what I'd like to talk about this morning. What kind of an identity is "the Name of Christ," and what kind of belonging does it afford us?

It seems urgent to me, because right now all sorts of identities and belonging seem to be able to wreak havoc as well as form communities. Our country is polarized; too many people seem to find facts according to what group they belong to, and not what reason and evidence discern.

But this is nothing new. “Nothing in this world is straightforward,” said an incisive theologian, “everything has another side.”ⁱ He didn’t mean facts are uncertain or anything like that. It means that nothing here and now is unambiguous or absolute. Has a shadow side. Whatever you want to call it: fallen, or flawed, or sin-sick humanity can turn our inner spirits sideways, and we get hate instead of love.

Yet our need to belong to each other, to share identities is God-given. A fellow retired clergy-type I know has taken up beekeeping for some years now. He gives talks and was at a booth at the Evergreen State Fair last month. A man comes up who had just started beekeeping. So they had an immediate belonging, or identity. It gets better. Being a pastor, my friend kept him talking. What sparked the interest?, he asked. The man said he had recently lost his wife. So he was lost, too. Seeking to help himself, he took up a new hobby. Well my pastor-beekeeper friend had also lost his wife, not recently, but the two

guys belonged to each other yet some more. Just a little story about how good it is to identify and find belonging when we are lost. If it sticks in your mind, you could tell it to yourself as a little parable, “the Kingdom of God is like. . .”

The good news of the “Name of Christ” gives us faith in a belonging that cannot be dissolved, an identity which only includes, and need not be defended. A word which is stronger than the toxic identities we can be trapped in. The joy of that faith, as it takes root in us, brings more freedom to love and not hate in order to protect ourselves.

It is always a scary process to let go of the power I feel being part of a group even, or especially when we can really be threatened for who we are. It’s a happy coincidence that we read the story of Esther and Haman today. Here identity and belonging are on display in all its ambiguity and danger and promise. Not in the kingdom to come; but the best we can manage in real history.

In this world, groups are vulnerable, oftentimes powerless against annihilation. Defense in real life can demand power to defeat the enemy. Here the Jews are defenseless and only wits and courage can save them, and they are saved! “We escaped like a bird from the snare!, we said in the psalm today.” Then

they are given a ritual commandment to fulfill, also a kind of identity marker: every year have joy remembering this. This is Purim, the Jewish holiday in February or March each year. Notice what I'll call the diaconal end in the story: "that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor."

That's how it is with the good news. It can open us to generosity.

The Name of Christ. I don't want to dilute that, or make it tentative, No. The larger story we've heard these last weeks in the Gospel of Mark make it clear that the ones following Jesus- that's us - can claim the Name of Christ only with the cross. Only with a Word which does *not* create another worldly power, or another tribe or another fortress. Is that why Jesus keeps telling them not to call him the Messiah, the Christ? Not until a Roman soldier says it at the Cross. Then the Name of Christ can indeed be truly straightforward, issuing in generosity, not exclusion. Then the name of Jesus does not belong to us, for our purposes. We belong to this Messiah.

The world of Haman the king is present as much as ever. People have to survive and protect themselves as best they can. Our best efforts are never simple. Peace can sometimes

be defended, maintained. But our most heroic actions are never without two sides.

What makes for peace, that is a godly belonging, a generous identity is shown by Jesus the crucified and risen.

What is this Christ asking us to put away from us? Eyes, limbs? What is stumbling or causing stumbling? Is it not to turn Christ's name into division, bad news, rejection? Better to live in faith. This Messiah does not belong to me, to what I think. I belong to this crucified Christ. That's good news, because as far as fulfilling the words Jesus says to me in today's Gospel, I don't do it very well. But I belong to that cross, to that Jesus.

All of us on this planet live in a tough neighborhood, though I am privileged to not notice it much. Maybe you're not either. But it is there, here, Jesus – the Christ – showed himself precisely, fully, straightforwardly in our double sided, double dealing human neighborhood, to speak a word that is stronger than the fears, threats, passions that are all round us, and within us.

Whatever you may take away from this sermon, let me just suggest the simplest.

~There is life-giving belonging and identity, even in everyday life. "The Kingdom of God is like two bee-keeping widowers."

~We also find that anything of ours, of itself, is fragile, with a shadow side.

~Jesus Christ reveals peace, by the cross and resurrection. We are sent with Christ's peace into a not-yet-healed community of human beings.

So looking at the service leaflet, I'd like to end this sermon together with you.

Let us go forth in peace.

In the name of Christ. Amen.

ⁱ“Who is a Christian?” Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1965



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