

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 30, 2012
Pentecost 18
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Numbers 11:4-20
Psalm 19
James 4:7-12
Mark 9:38-48

We find ourselves once again in that part of Mark's Gospel where Jesus is predicting his impending suffering and death, and where he calls on his disciples to deny themselves and live a life of humble service to others.

Today's lesson *begins* with John questioning Jesus about a man who is casting out demons in Jesus' name, but who is not a part of the disciples' group. It *ends* by focusing on the need for self-reflection and self-criticism, lest we cause those who would follow Jesus to stumble.

The major theme that surfaces here for me is Jesus' concern for *tolerance*. Now this word "tolerance" has become such a loaded word in our society that I am aware of the dangers of bringing it up. Nonetheless, I shall try it anyway.

For many, the word "tolerance" has come to mean an acceptance of all beliefs and practices as being equal. Where religion is concerned, it has often been expressed in the old adage, "all roads lead to the same destination." Because all beliefs and practices are of equal value, tolerance essentially becomes *relativism*.

We should not be surprised, then, when Christians are often labeled today as being “intolerant.”

But tolerance is not synonymous with relativism, and that’s not how I am using the word. Based on my reading of Jesus’ words here in the Gospel lesson, I am defining tolerance as *the practice of seeking to understand those whose beliefs and practices are different from our own*. The very word “tolerance” implies differences. What is important in faith communities is learning to negotiate those differences in a way that glorifies Jesus Christ.

Jesus gives us two specific examples here. First has to do with our attitudes and perceptions about those who are “outside” of our group. We might interpret this both in a broad and in a narrow sense.

Broadly, we may see those who are not part of our group as those who belong to other religious faiths. What does tolerance involve in that situation?

Well, for starters, it does *not* mean that you must give up your belief in Jesus as the Son of God, or your belief that Jesus uniquely and completely reveals God to us. It does not mean that you must become a universalist and give up your conviction that salvation comes to us uniquely in the person of Jesus (cf. Acts 4:12).

It *does* mean that we will want to lose our “attitude,” the same attitude the disciples had which led them to believe that they were superior to others who were not part of their group.

It *does* mean that you seek to understand the motives and the methods of those who may be radically different from you, or whose faith may be different than yours.

And when those of a different faith perform works of mercy and compassionate acts of healing, accept and give thanks for those good deeds. For surely the healing, thirst-quenching spirit of Christ transcends our religious boundaries, and people of other faiths can experience Christ’s power, even though they may not call it by his Name.

More narrowly speaking, we may interpret those who are not of our group to be those of other denominations or churches, or perhaps even our own local congregation.

Once again, tolerance is called for.

How do we practice tolerance for other Christians who believe and worship differently than we do, or for brothers and sisters in our own congregation who see things differently at times?

We do so by realizing that *what we say and what we do matters a great deal*, especially in the way it can affect others. We must constantly strive to be sensitive

to the well being of our brothers and sisters, because our attitudes and actions affect them beyond what we can imagine.

One of the hardest lessons for us to learn in this regard is that good Christian people with deep faith convictions don't always experience Jesus' call to discipleship in the same way. All of us here may be devout Christians, but we do not all see the path of discipleship in the same way.

Agnes Norfleet says it like this:

We are given lots of information [i.e., in Scripture] about what it means to follow Jesus Christ, but it is hardly a road map with clear directional signs. Jesus warns us: Don't let your understanding of discipleship cause another to stumble in their following...Jesus invites us into a following that is framed with enormous freedom. With that freedom comes great responsibility. A person's faithful response includes keeping others from stumbling over one's own judgment.

[Lectionary Homiletics, 14:5, p. 66]

When it comes to being tolerant of our brothers and sisters in the faith, or of our brothers and sisters within the local church, one good practice to follow is that of keeping our self-righteousness in check, and practicing the humility James speaks about in today's epistle lesson. Although his words call for our careful interpretation, James says that when we criticize each other we are in effect criticizing God and God's law. The better path is to humble ourselves before God, to draw near to God so that God will draw near to us.

I want to illustrate this with the help of our acolytes today. [Form a circle, with God at the imaginary center. Then have everyone move closer to God, i.e., toward the center. The amazing thing is that we cannot draw closer to God without drawing closer to each other.]

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let us do so with the image of the circle firmly in our minds. Let us imagine that all of us are forming the circle. And let us make space for others to join the circle, even if their vision of the Christian life doesn't exactly match ours.

For as we come to the Table, we are moving toward the center, toward God himself. As we move closer to God, we cannot help but move closer to one another.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.