

I often wonder if I am simply preaching to the choir, sermonizing the same old, same old, as in “same sermon, second verse; a whole lot louder, and a whole lot worse!” I just get a feeling that so many of my sermons seem to have a similar theme, returning to the same place, reaching the same conclusions.

That is probably due to the fact that, well, they do! After all, the Gospel gives us a clear lane, an obviously narrow pathway to follow, and so, of course, similarity, repetition and redundancy, are woven into the fabric of any sermonic enterprise.

The reason I begin this sermon with somewhat of an apologetic disclaimer is that the message we read today from the Witness from the Gospels is transparently obvious, a message we have heard time and time again. Once again, we read a word about acceptance, inclusion, and at a minimum, tolerance. It is a sermon about playing nice, playing together, sharing the same space, yes, getting along one with another.

This morning we encounter some proud and pious disciples, yes, the same chosen twelve we have come to know so well. For reasons unknown, perhaps to gain or maintain control or power, Jesus’ proteges are exhibiting some nasty, very un-Jesus like behavior. They arrogantly forbid a fellow follower from doing exactly the kind of thing Jesus had advocated for and instructed those faithful to him to do. They saw someone casting out demons in the name of Jesus and believed that this individual was in error and greatly misguided. We are never told who this unnamed individual is, or of what tribe or clan, perhaps a gentile or a woman or both.

The disciples chastised this person, maintaining that THAT ritual, the casting out of demons, was one only to be done by Jesus, Jesus’s job alone. Do not imitate him! That sacred act is reserved for the superior likes of who they thought mistakenly, themselves to be.

THEY were the chosen, the apostles who believed that being closest meant most special, selected at the expense and the rejection of others. They exhibited tones of religious zealotry, taking their beliefs to an extreme, refusing to accept other perspectives or differences. And they were certain their actions were just and warranted.

Though these levels of passion may give an individual a brief spiritual high, addictive in so many ways, the damage done unfortunately, can have a lasting impact. Just look at the ongoing religiously motivated conflicts the world has experienced for centuries. Look at the current crises overwhelming everyone in the Near, what many call the Middle East, the negative residual affecting Israelis and Palestinians, Iranians and every other culture in this part of the world.

Again, I have often wondered if the unnamed demon-caster-outer happened by chance to be a gentile, a woman, a Samaritan, or all the above combined. Perhaps a eunuch, a leper, or any of the myriad of folks who are identified as different, those who frequently live on the margins, all the dispossessed, disenfranchised, any who live with adjectives used to expose their frailties, that make them vulnerably compromised.

Divisions seem so much a normal part of our routine, divisiveness especially prevalent around Christian people of faith. So hard to realize that. While we are at war with one another, the world watches.

Oh, I am sure the disciples did what they did with the best of intentions, thinking they were doing a good and righteous thing in dissuading this presumably unconscionable behavior. Surely, they thought to themselves that this was something Jesus would commend, appreciate and applaud, giving them a well-deserved high five. They were so sure of themselves, that beaming with pride they boasted to Jesus that they had put a stop to these unauthorized actions right in their tracks.

Now the good news is that Jesus did not go postal on them, scolding them to excess, but only gave them a mild reprimand, the text helping us assume that there was no screaming and yelling, no hellfire and brimstone. Jesus did not call them out as idiots or fools, raising the anxiety of the moment or the anxiety of his always willing pupils.

After all, we have just read in the previous text that there were ‘little ones’, children, in their company, perhaps a child was sitting on Jesus’ lap through the whole tensely uncomfortable conversation. No wonder the rabbi was on his best behavior, his temper tempered! And besides, as with so many moments they spent together, this was a teachable moment.

Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, if anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to Christ, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded.” After all, just because someone is different, does not mean they are wrong!

The Gospel writer takes Jesus immediately for his reassurance to the disciples that they are called to be examples to a QUICK reprimand. Each disciple was given the responsibility to be a positive enabler, one who encourages. They were to embolden and empower rather than degrade, diminish, or detract. They were not to forbid good works from what may be assumed to be unlikely places or surprising sources. The disciples learned a valuable lesson that day, a lesson we all need to learn! This text reminds us that diversity is the key to living the Gospel.

There are a whole lot of people... Christians and people of other faiths and people of no faith, there are a whole lot of folks with whom we differ, vehemently so at times, but many, perhaps most of these same people, are doing a whole lot of good, indeed, a world of good. So be it! Let us acknowledge that a big part of our reward occurs in the here and now in the service of others. Let’s call this servanthood a gift to enjoy and share, a gift we are blessed to offer every day we have breath.

Jesus ends this text with these words, “Maintain salt among yourselves and keep peace with each other!”

If we spend our time doing the good works of the Gospel, we will have no time to be concerned about minding our neighbor in ways that are non productive or that diminish the human being. We will have no time to mind the business that is no business of ours!

Yes, sometimes a word must still be spoken regarding things we find offensive, inappropriate, contrary to the good news of the Gospel.

Even so, Jesus reminds us to be careful, yes, to watch and wait, to be on guard, to always think before we speak lest ‘we open mouth and insert foot’. We are reminded to make sure our motives, along with any subsequent actions are responsive and not reactive.

Next Sunday we will celebrate World Communion. In anticipation, let us prepare our hearts and minds with millions from around the world as we joyfully gather to celebrate at sacred tables and altars in churches of so many varieties. We are reminded that we are all connected in numerous ways descending from one glorious strand, united as one holy, catholic, apostolic, and universal Church. Even when we do not want it or when we deny it!

This morning we get a jump start reminder of the desperate need, the absolute urgency, to find even the remotest things we have and hold in common, the things that keep us, that tether us to one another and to God rather than all that conflicts and divides us, that seeks to separate and segregate us. At the most BASIC level as part of the global corporate body of Christ, our hope and our prayer is that there is still more that unites us, that brings us together, than divides us.

As followers of Jesus, we must persist in speaking truth in love. We are ever reminded that our actions are always measured against the high standard, the high calling of the faith entrusted to our care. We are ever called to be active expressions of God's love in the world.

We walk by faith and not by sight! There by the grace of God go us all!
Blessings for the journey! And all will be well!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and blesses every cup of cold water, no matter its source, no matter who pours it! Amen and amen!