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SERMON "THOSE PEOPLE OUT THERE"

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Those People Out There
Mark 9: 38-50



It's quite scary to think just how narrow our concept of God can be. Sometimes we create a pocket God, created in our own image and then we imagine that God loves all that we love and hates all the people we hate.

When I read the text from the Gospel of Mark, I am reminded that sometimes, Christians don't quite get the power of Jesus' message. Some time ago, I was talking with a young person, who was a very devout Christian. I can't remember the exact content of our conversation, but I remember saying that Roman Catholics were Christians. The young man was completely surprised at my statement. I proceeded to explain that Roman Catholics, like the rest of Christianity uphold the basic beliefs of the faith, namely Jesus' ministry and resurrection. I am not sure if I was able to persuade the young man, but at least I gave it a shot.

I know some of you read the article about our church published in *The Reader* this past week. Matthew, the reporter who wrote the article, was intrigued about how I could reconcile being a member of a progressive denomination and being a U.S. Navy Chaplain. A couple of things he didn't quote accurately, but one thing I did say was that being in charge of a group of chaplains coming from diverse and sometimes, opposite faith perspectives and that in spite of our differences we could still work as a team and provide faith ministry to the troops. I also said that I wish the rest of the world could behave the same way.

But, I have to admit that I haven't held this perspective all of my life. As a teenager, I believed Catholics as well as other Christians were bound to hell. For me, Methodists were not Christians because they baptized babies and did not dunk adults; Episcopalians were not Christians because they drank; and so were Presbyterians, Lutherans and the rest. If you were not a Christian like I was, you were in need of salvation. Yes, my friends, as a teenager, I was on a self-righteous faith trip! And I was wrong!

The text this morning shows us the disciples acting in similar fashion. John says to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Jesus tells John, "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."

A couple of things strike me in this passage. First, the disciples don't seem to care about the fact that the individual, who was ill, was healed. They quickly forget that Jesus' ministry has been about helping and about empowering others. They feel that they are

the only ones who can perform miracles, since they are part of Jesus' inner circle. In doing so, they forget that the power wasn't theirs to dispense, the power belonged to their teacher and ultimately, the power for healing resided in God.

The other thing that strikes me is that the disciples missed the bigger picture. Now, I should not be so hard on the disciples, after all, sometimes we do the same thing. Sometimes we get so caught up in who gets the credit for doing a good deed instead of just being happy that something worthwhile was done. At one point or another, we all need to hear Jesus' words again, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

That's quite a broad statement, don't you think? Often times we believe we are the only ones with the truth. By golly! We are right and everyone else is wrong! I often criticize other Christians whose definition of evangelization is to convince the rest of the world to believe the way they believe. But, there are times that I, a progressive Christian, dismiss what others are doing and I base my judgment on the fact that they are "evangelicals" or "conservative" Christians. Sometimes I catch myself belittling the conservative churches, looking down my nose at some aspect of their worship or theology. Instead of lovingly accepting the differences between them and us, I find myself thinking that somehow we're superior.

That's when I know that I need to get out my eraser and expand the circle once more. It seems to me that Jesus went out of his way to include all kinds of people. He called common fishermen to become his disciples. He invited a cheating tax collector named Zaccheus to eat dinner with him. As he hung on the cross, he invited the thief dying next to him to join him that day in Paradise. And so I find myself wondering, why do so many churches encourage us to exclude one another?

There are lots of churches that wouldn't allow our members or even our ministers to take Communion during their worship services. We're excluded because we don't belong to their church or their denomination. There are many churches that only baptize by immersion. If you were baptized as a baby and want to join their church, you have to get baptized by them, the right way, before they'll let you join. Statistically, more churches than not exclude women from serving as clergy. That's half the human population. And the vast majority of churches say that people who are gay or lesbian are hell-bound, instead of seeing all people as children of God.

Rev. Marie Ford, a UCC minister in Hartford, Connecticut, has this to say about broadening our boundaries. She says, "God's liberating ministry is not confined to any in-group or person. Whoever helps to free folks from forces that bind hearts and cripple lives is Jesus' faithful disciple. We don't have to agree with the approach or the

perspective. Our worship will vary within the Christian faith: some may be more vocal than others; others silent in their prayerfulness; some may focus their worship on our sinfulness, others on the grace of God; but...we are all in the same family” (www.southchurchhartford.org/sermons/2000-10-01).

Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” And while he was certainly speaking to a specific situation, a miracle done in his name by someone outside his inner circle, I believe we should apply this notion as widely as possible. Whoever is not against us is for us. Whoever seeks to help and heal a broken world, regardless of the religious label or lack thereof, should be welcome in our circle. Whoever seeks to love and forgive, regardless of where they spend their Sunday mornings, should be welcome in our circle. Whoever seeks to feed the hungry and house the homeless, regardless of their theological stance or worship style should be included in our circle.

I believe most of you would agree with me when I say that our work of faith must include everyone who acts in love, no matter the form or the face. The challenge, however, is how do we respond to people who would rather inflict injury than promote healing, to people who choose hate over love? Since they are obviously outside our circle and since they are obviously against us, does that mean we should keep them outside the circle?

I think not. Jesus challenges us to expand our circle even more. For he also said, “Love your enemies.” And he said of his own executioners, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Expanding our circle to include those who do evil does not mean that we condone their actions. It doesn’t mean we are going to let them off the hook. It means that we recognize our common humanity. It means we hope that even these people can be transformed by God’s love. My prayer is that we, as a church and as individuals, will include, invite and welcome all of God’s children; and that we rejoice in love, whatever the name, whatever the face, whatever the form it takes. Amen.