

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Sermon from: Mark 9, 38-50.

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St. John's, Olympia

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Though separated by hundreds of years, the scenes that the Book of Numbers and the Gospel of Saint Mark recreate for us today are identical. In the first passage, the Spirit of the Lord has filled the elders of Israel. As it is a Spirit that escapes the narrow human borders, it has also filled two elders who are not with the group of the elect. That is why there is an immediate reaction. Joshua turns to Moses asking him to prohibit those intruders from the prophetic action they were carrying out in the camp.

Fortunately, Moses was wise in this situation because he had a direct and personal relationship with the Lord. His response is a sign of maturity and wisdom: There will be no prohibition, but quite the opposite, because, as he says, "I wish all the Lord's people were prophets and received the Spirit of the Lord!" Moses was not at all jealous of those prophets who were not in his group; he did not believe that he had the exclusive right to the Spirit of God, and he was deeply happy when that Spirit blew where it wanted.

Moses did not prohibit those prophets from carrying out their work; on the contrary, he understood and with complacency accepted the phenomenon that left his assistant Joshua perplexed and angry. These are two different ways of understanding God's action. The passage of Saint Mark seems to be a faithful reproduction of the Old Testament scene. These two readings speak to us of the same question: divisions between human beings.

The story goes that in the wars between Caesar and Pompey, the latter, suspicious and cunning, considered and treated as enemies all those who did not openly manifest themselves as his allies, while Caesar, more generous and intelligent, considered all who did not fight him to be his allies. This difference in mood and history gave Caesar victory over Pompey. In the Gospel, Jesus calls us to have that same generosity and openness towards others: anyone who is not against us is with us.

So, Christians, instead of imagining hostilities and fabricating ghosts, we should cooperate with all human beings of goodwill, who number far more than we sometimes think.

Today's gospel scene is amazing. The disciples approach Jesus with a problem. This time, the spokesperson for the group is not Peter, but John, one of the two brothers who seek leading positions in the community of the disciples. Now John claims that the group of disciples has the exclusive right to Jesus and the monopoly of his liberating actions for other people.

The disciples become worried. An exorcist not integrated in the group is casting demons in the name of Jesus. The disciples are not happy that people are healed and free with the opportunity to start a more humane life. They only think about the prestige of their own group. Therefore, they have tried to nip the performance of this person who was also healing from his own faith. The only reason for such efforts: "He's not one of us."

Jesus' group assumes that to act on His behalf and with His healing power, it is necessary to be a member of His group. No one can appeal to Jesus and work for a more humane world without being part of the Church.

Is it really like this today?

What does Jesus think about this?

His first words are resounding: "Don't stop them." The name of Jesus and his humanizing force are more important than the small group of his disciples. It is good that the salvation that Jesus brings extends beyond the established Church and helps people to live in a more human way. No one should see it as unfair competition.

Jesus breaks all sectarian temptation in His followers. He has formed His group to share his messianic salvation. He is not a rabbi of a closed school in his mind, but rather a prophet of a salvation open to all without distinction. His Church exists to support His name where He is invoked to do good for every human being.

Jesus does not want His followers to speak of those who are "ours" and those who are not, nor those inside and outside, nor those who can act in His name and those who cannot. His way of seeing things is different: "Anyone who is not against us is for us."

In our society, there are many men and women who work for a more just and humane world without belonging to the Church. Some are not even believers, but they are opening ways to the kingdom of God and His justice. They are one of us. We are to rejoice instead of looking at them with resentment. We must support them rather than disqualify them.

It is a mistake to live our faith in Jesus Christ, seeing hostility and evil everywhere, naively believing that only we are bearers of the Spirit of Jesus. He would not approve of that claim according to today's gospel. He would invite us to collaborate joyfully with all those who live in an evangelical way and care for those who most need a helping hand to move forward in life.

In this divided and confused world, Christians have a message and a task: to work for unity, that is, to fight to eradicate everything that divides and confronts human beings and peoples. Our position is, therefore, against the inequality that divides and confronts rich and poor people. Our position is to work against injustice that exploits and marginalizes. Furthermore, our position is to unmask any ideology that seeks to segregate human beings into classes, castes, first and second citizens, or simply into good and bad.

For Jesus, “ours” are all those who are not expressly against us. This means that we should rejoice when others work in favor of the Kingdom of God, which is full of justice and peace. But it also means that we can and must add our efforts to those of all men of goodwill, even if they do not share the same faith or if they express themselves in different languages or ways. The Christian faith cannot be a pretext for separatism or discrimination, but rather it should embrace the force of God that unites all efforts in favor of justice, equality and fraternity.

That is why our Eucharistic meeting every Sunday is not an escape from the world that surrounds us, nor should it be a pretext to feel like the chosen ones. We gather around the fraternal table of God our Father to catch our breath and speak, and thus, return to our task in the world with all men and women of goodwill.

Being a disciple of the group of Jesus reminds us of today's Gospel: we must see the positive in life, collaborate with all emancipatory forces, be grateful for all help, serve others freely and not criticize those who are inspired by Christ to do goodwill in their own ways. Ultimately, the foundations of our community should be founded on generosity, tolerance, respect and fraternity between all groups. Amen.