

SPG# 217, Pentecost 17B, Proper 21

September 27, 2009

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

And Jesus said, **Whoever is not against us is for us.** In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, as I arrived here at church to meet with the Church Secretary, I discovered that there was a problem with my hearing aid. Whatever adjustments I made did not work. But then I discovered that Gailanne had laryngitis and could barely speak. So we were in the position of needing to communicate but essentially unable to hear and speak. We decided that God must have a sense of humor. I flashed back then to over twenty years ago, when I was on the staff of a mental health center in Le Mars, Iowa. I was one of those who was helping to plan our annual social event for the center. We thought we might divide the big group up into small groups and play the game "Pictionary," which was popular then. In that game team members have to communicate ideas by drawing them instead of using words or speaking. We thought it was a great idea until we remembered that one of our therapists from Orange City, Iowa was blind. Since my experience with Gailanne and my flashback, I have been more aware of some of the more ironic and paradoxical things that go on in our everyday lives that also can appear more or less comical or more or less absurd.

It is common on any given day to read on the internet or to hear on television where some celebrity was insulted and offended by what some other celebrity said. It is common on any given day to read on the internet or to hear on television where politicians react in the same way to statements made in a seconds long sound byte.

In all of this chatter, there is very little emphasis on the context in which any statement was made. There is very little emphasis on the background of a person or of a statement. And if your life consists of a steady diet of such statements on the internet or on TV, it is possible to fall into a mindset where we assume everyone must have a “position,” where everyone is confrontive, or insulting, or ready to be insulted. And many times what is called news in the mass media is a collection of such pro and con statements.

In this context then, when something truly historical happens we could tend to relegate it to this superficial chatter that is part and parcel of the mass media, and part and parcel of our everyday lives. About a year and a half ago, Bishops from the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church in Iowa took the unprecedented step of allowing clergy from both communions to preside at services in both churches. St. Paul’s continues to live into that vision this morning as we are led in today’s service by Rev. Carolyn Bittner. And it is again an historic occasion because in her leading us we do our part to heal a division within the larger Church that has been in place for hundreds of years.

The underpinnings of today’s event have to do with committees of laypeople and clergy from both communions who have met together for decades to bring this to pass. And more pieces to this reunion will be put in place as live into the future.

And so it is no superficial thing. It has to do with appreciation of diversity. It has to do with mutual respect and consideration. It has to do with coming together. It has to do with being one in Christ.

But even before all of the efforts in the communions that led to today's event, in the scripture, is found the mandate for such oneness and such appreciation.

In the gospel for today, when the disciples approach Jesus, they report that someone was casting out demons in Jesus' name. But, said the disciples, since he was not one of us, we tried to stop him. But Jesus told them to not try and stop him. And then he said,

Whoever is not against us is for us. That in itself is a radical statement of inclusivity and hospitality. And that in itself flies in the face of a prevailing "us and them" mentality in our society. But he is not done. For in elaborating on this inclusivity he speaks in exaggerated terms to make his point. He says, **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 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.

And then he speaks of the value of salt, which was used to preserve meat. And he asks, if the salt has lost its function, its saltiness, what good is it. He concludes then by saying, **Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.** And so in saying **be at peace with one another**, he ends with the point that he made at the first, **whoever is not against us is for us.** And in between those two statements he hammers home the absolute importance of being accepting and inclusive.

And so, years ago, when United Methodists and Episcopalians first sat down to consider a new oneness, it was not just a novel idea or a nice gesture. It was in consideration of scriptures like today's gospel where inclusivity and oneness are seen as absolutely crucial and necessary in the Christian life.

This movement between our two churches is something for all of us to be proud of and part of. And perhaps the dialogue between the two churches puts us to mind of other ways we can be inclusive and hospitable to many. But to be sure, it is not always easy. For many times the lines we are challenged to cross in hospitality and acceptance have to do with being kind to someone with whom you disagree. And yet the biblical mandate to do so is undeniable. And it is additionally not easy because our mass media world gives countless examples of "us and them," of offending and being ready to take offense.

And so in the dialogue between United Methodists and Episcopalians that occurs in the larger Church, we may discern that in Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth. Amen.