

Mark 9:38-50 September 29, 2018

The gospel reading today is surprising, isn't it? The disciples have found someone driving away demons in Jesus' name, but he is not a Christian who is doing this. He uses Christ's name but he is not a disciple of Christ. So the good, responsible disciples do what you and I would probably do, they step in and put a stop to it. "You can't heal in Jesus' name if you are not a follower of Jesus. First come and listen to him, learn from him, be baptized and spend a couple of years with Jesus, and then you will understand and be able to go out and heal and help. But you can't just go around using Jesus' name to heal people. Stop it right now!

Their chests no doubt puffed out a little bit as they went to Jesus to report what they had done. We stopped someone healing people in your name, but don't worry we took care of the situation. We stopped him in his tracks. Grins spread across their faces. They look at each other as they smile. 'But their smiles vanish as Jesus speaks, Don't stop him. Nobody who does deeds of power in my name will be able to speak evil about me for very long. Let him continue. Whoever is not against us is for us.

Why didn't Jesus congratulate the disciples and condemn those using his name with authorization? I mean this person was not only a Christian he was a heathen. He was not a faithful follower of Jesus, he was not a committed disciple like those gathered around Jesus. He's not one of us and he's trying to do our work. How can you allow this?

Jesus' tolerance is amazing. He does not demand that a person be a card carrying Christian in order to heal other people. In fact this one who is doing healing in Jesus' name seems to have had very different

beliefs. Here Jesus looks at the work this man is doing rather than his belief system. Jesus looks at his deeds, not his creeds. And apparently Jesus sees potential for him. He does not believe now, but for how long will he be able to go on healing in Jesus name without wanting to know more about Jesus and who he is? Might there not be an opportunity to reach this healer through the back door? If he does work in Jesus' name first, then there might come the time when he wants to discover more about who this Jesus is, and perhaps he will come to the point of eventually trusting in Christ and dedicating himself to Christ. He must have some faith in Christ already or else he would not be healing in Jesus' name. Perhaps that faith can become a real commitment to Christ. And in the meantime he's doing good. His healing is helping God's cause. Don't judge him; at least he is doing good work.

When we work with those who have similar concerns about justice, or love or caring for God's world, or fairness, we have an opportunity to show how our faith is involved in the world. If others, who don't believe as we do, see our commitment and our trust in God, maybe they will be drawn closer to faith because they have worked with us. We have a chance to share our faith and demonstrate the power of the God we believe in.

We have an opportunity in situations to let our lights shine into those lives. If we work with people in causes that are good and just, we have a chance to show our faith and speak about our God. If we condemn those who don't believe as we do, we have made an enemy. If we support them in the good that they are doing, we have made a friend. And let's face it; it's easier to bring a friend to appreciate your faith than it is to bring an enemy.

This is not to say that we should ever deny our faith, or bend our moral principles, but we support those of different beliefs, or of no belief, in the cause of justice or compassion or freedom that they are involved with us. Like the healer of Jesus' day we support them in the good that they do, even though they don't believe as we do.

Maybe what Jesus is saying in the surprising response that he gave to his disciple in this gospel reading is that God is not limited to accomplishing his will through people who are Christian. God can work through anyone, of any belief, to bring about the kingdom. In fact, as we all know, sometimes God has to work around us Christians in order to accomplish his will.

God can and does work through you and me. God can and does work through people of every faith, and people of no faith. God is not limited to only Christian help, as Jesus makes clear in this gospel story. Jesus' tolerance is surprising to the disciples. It's also surprising to us modern day disciples. Like the original disciples, we want to limit who can do God's will. We want to check credentials and certify statements of faith and authorize missions. But not Jesus. Doing God's will is not confined to those who believe as we do. Sometimes we say with Jesus, "Those who are not against us are for us."

Thanks be to God for the mystery and wonder of God's ways. AMEN