

September 30, 2012

“Who Does Holy Work?”

[Ordinary 26B: Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, California]

Numbers 11.24-30

Mark 9.38-41

In the present economic situation there've been a lot of cutbacks! Here's one about a man hired to replace the gorilla at the zoo. He dons a gorilla suit, goes into the cage and begins acting like an ape. Unbeknownst to him another guy has been hired to replace the lion. He puts on a lion suit and accidentally goes into the wrong cage, the one with the fake gorilla. The man in the gorilla suit sees the lion and panics. Screaming and running about the cage, he tries to escape. The lion jumps on him, knocking him down. “Shut up!” the lion shouts, “You'll get us both fired!” It's nice to meet someone with whom you have something in common, a mutual calling under the skin—or under the fur as it were.

Joshua the son of Nun and John the disciple of Jesus have something in common under the skin in the way they come running to Moses and Jesus like a couple of tattle-tale kids. “Lord Moses, stop them!” shouts Joshua, “They're prophesying!” “Hey, Teacher!” John yells, “We saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop it—'cause he's not one of us!” Their attitudes about those doing holy work is contrary to that of Moses and Jesus.

No doubt both Moses and Jesus do double takes! If their scenes were on film, they would turn to the camera with looks that say, “Can you believe this?” “Would that all God's people were prophets!” says Moses. “Don't stop him,” Jesus exasperates, “'cause no one who does miracles in my name will bad mouth me for long after that. Hey! Those not against us are for us!”

The thing that really upsets Joshua and John is that those doing the holy work are not part of them. They're not of their tribe, sect or clan. They want to stop them because they're not Presbyterians nor a members of the church; O my God, they're not even Christians! Yet Moses and Jesus speak out against the elit-

ism of their disciples who want to limit those who can prophesy to the children of Israel alone and confine those who heal just to the followers of Jesus. “We’ve got to limit them to those who are ‘one of us,’ who are part of our own select group.” Joshua and John’s statements reflect an intolerance of anyone who does holy work outside their own crowd. They try to define who can and who can not do God’s work. But Moses and Jesus indicate that the good done and the grace given are more important than who does them. The fact that holy work is done is what really counts.

There’s a lot of ego involved in this. We want to do the prophesying and casting out. We want to take credit as real Christians, the truly certified people of God. Maybe we want to believe that no one else can do it. In effect, what Joshua and John are saying is that perhaps it would be better that not so many people hear the Word of God or are cured, so that the few who do hear or who are healed—hear from and are cured by the right people! But Moses and Jesus won’t accept it. They say don’t stop others from doing God’s work. “Those who don’t oppose us are one with us.”

We see the same attitude among Jesus’ followers even today. We often take the narrower rather than the broader view in defining with whom God can or cannot work. Many people assume God only works through Christians, or God only works through those who have been born again, or God only works through conscientious middle-class believers, or God only works through those who are ordained, and so on. All this is too narrow and flies in the face of common experience—and the scriptures!

God works through a multitude of churches, denominations, and faiths—both singly and together. The group of congregations making up HOPE-NET, and supplying our Food Pantry, is a good example of this. It includes Christian chur-

ches, a Jewish temple, a Unitarian-Universalist congregation and the Islamic center. God works through vastly different people and widely differing faiths. God's work is done with an abundant variety of skills, abilities and faith commitments. God also works through New Age intellectuals who says all paths lead to God, through those who have never heard about Christ and through those who don't believe—atheists and agnostics. A clear non-Christian example is the Mahatma Gandhi who certainly did God's work when achieving India's independence, and whose principles of non-violence influenced generations of subsequent Christians in the American Civil Rights Movement and the liberation struggles of Eastern Europe, South Africa and now the Middle East. Like those Joshua and John are trying to silence, Gandhi did God's work though he never considered himself Christian.

We who follow Christ are not to be so narrow and closed off from the world in our perspectives. We believe all peoples of the world are God's children and that the Divine is at work among all communities and nations of people to bring humanity and the world to its promised redemption. We need to look at God's people with a more inclusive view of those who do God's work. How can we expect to limit God, to confine God's work or attempt to define for God those through whom divine work is done?

The following hymn reminds us of this wider view of faith. "There's a wideness in God's mercy, / like the wideness of the sea. There's a kindness in God's justice, / which is more than liberty. / . . . / For the love of God is stronger than the measure of the mind, / and the heart of the eternal / is most wonderfully kind . . ."*

As Christians, we need to be careful we don't confuse the means with the ends. We cannot confine the good that can be accomplished because we only ac-

cept certain people doing it. We should not limit the gospel by limiting those who communicate it by their acts. God's work is achieved in many ways, even by those we may not approve of or might not think worthy. For instance miraculous healing regularly takes place through non-Christian physicians and surgeons. We don't have to have all our medical professionals pass doctrinal exams in order to acceptably exercise their healing skills. The surgeon who operates may have a despicable character—even if a Christian. A non-believing surgeon may save a life. Jesus says the cure which takes place is God's healing, and that's more important than the physician who does it.

Of course this doesn't mean we reduce faith to the lowest common denominator. It doesn't mean we water down belief until it suits everyone's taste. The fact that others may be doing God's work doesn't affect the commitment and devotion demanded of faith. In fact, God and Jesus are very harsh towards those who slack off on their faith obligations. In the very next passages in Numbers and Mark, God and Jesus who may seem lenient toward those outside the community of faith are very demanding of those inside it. In Numbers God sends a plague upon those who gather more than enough quail to last a day. In Mark Jesus goes on to say, "If your hand, foot or your eye causes you to sin, cut it off! It's better for you to go into heaven maimed, than go to hell with two hands, two feet or two eyes." Yikes!

Jesus doesn't mean this literally, of course, or we would have a gospel full of accounts of one-handed, one-footed and one-eyed disciples—for they were all sinners both before and after the resurrection. Imagine, though, if we did take him seriously. Think of what lame, limbless, and blinded Christians we would be! Jesus' point there is that life with God—life which is life indeed—is life worth the sacrifices we may have to make.

Neither Moses nor Jesus water down faith. They say only that other people do not have to be “one of us” to be able to do God’s work. It’s not that the Christian church is going to be replaced but that we must reach out to work with those who are not part of the Body of Christ as we labor together in God’s world. Christ does not minister in a vacuum, and neither do we.

Even elementary human kindness is highly valued. A kindness by anyone is valued. Jesus says that even an act as small as giving a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty is remembered. When little needs are met it makes a difference. It makes a difference—that’s our refrain! So repeat it with me. I’ll give a sign!

Maybe we just speak to an elderly person who lives alone near us
and who is intensely lonely—it makes a difference!

Maybe we just bring a can of food for the Food Pantry which goes
to a needy family—it makes a difference!

Maybe we just stop by a nursing home to visit with some of the
residents—it makes a difference!

Maybe we just stoop down and speak with a child and really listen
to the little one—it makes a difference!

Maybe we just write a note to one of our young people and let them
know that we’re praying for them—it makes a difference!

Maybe we just turn around and go back and say ‘thank you’ for a
kindness done to us—it makes a difference!

Little kindnesses matter and don’t go unnoticed—even a cup of cold water. So maybe caring matters more than the person who does it. Perhaps the fact that a cure occurs is more important than who does the healing. We don’t need to worry about whether those who do acts of mercy qualify theologically in our eyes or not. The Holy One will labor where, when and with whom God chooses. It’s

not for us to put limits on the work of God.

We only need to minister in the name of Christ and thank God for whatever help we receive along the way. The needs before us in the world—even in our own community—are simply too great for us to be concerned about who God is calling to meet them. Compassion is what counts. Healing, clothing and providing food, reconciliation, peacemaking and working for justice are what matter—even a cup of cold water. “For those who are not against us are our sisters and brothers under the skin.”

AMEN!

*“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy,” by Frederick William Faber, altered; Dutch melody arranged by Julius Röntgen, *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Know Press, 1990), No. 298.