

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's reading from Mark continues where we left off last week. Jesus still has a child in his arms after he reminded the disciples that welcoming the powerless, the dependent, and the vulnerable is what makes someone the greatest. And then, without missing a beat, John pipes up with what, I imagine, was an attempt at a humble brag. He says, "Hey, Jesus, I saw this person who was working for justice, liberating people from infliction, and healing people in your name. But, because he wasn't with us, doing it our way, we stopped him." Jesus was confused. How are these disciples still not getting it. It's deja vu all over again. I imagine Jesus wondered why John served this other person a cease and desist notice? So, Jesus said, "Whoever is not against us is for us. Whoever helps those in need has done a good thing."

And did you notice how Jesus said that? He did NOT say "Whoever is not with us is against us." Rather, Jesus said, "whoever is not against us is for us." Those are two very different statements. Jesus asserts an inclusive attitude. He's argued for new partnership and relationships. He rearticulated, once again, that the disciples are to be about inclusion not exclusion. He said that just because they don't walk like you, talk like you, worship like you, or do the same service projects as you doesn't mean that their faithful acts aren't good. Or just because they don't do Sunday School like we do, or that they don't have gatherings like we do, or that they don't have music like we do doesn't make their acts of love any less valuable.

And I think that's sometimes hard for us Christians to really understand. How many times do we come to a new church or become a new member and think that every church needs to walk, talk, act, and be like the ones we know. If we are educating all ages in the faith, then that doesn't mean a Sunday School or a Bible study of two or three is any less than a program with fifty people. This is a difficult truth sometimes even more difficult to comprehend what faithful means.

This is the work that our Congregation Council discusses and struggles with each year as they review the responses to our congregation ministry survey. Those conversations take seriously what our members and guests see in this place and weigh it with what being faithful to Christ's work means for us in this time and place. A little bit later today, you're going to hear from Alison about where the Council see the Spirit leading in the months and years ahead in this place. As a community, we are called to be true and faithful to Christ's mission to love and serve our neighbor, and I hope that you'll see that we in this place are working to do just that.

Because that is the kind of opportunity we have here as a faith community. Each week we gather to hear a similar message told in a different manner. Each week we come to receive support in times of trouble and be a support in times of joy. Each week we hear stories of our ancestors that remind us to be inclusive, to strive for justice, to work for peace, and to center those on the margins. Each week, we think of the little children among us, like Dean, who we commit to sharing the Christian faith with love and compassion.

And that where the hyperbolic sense of the last half of today's gospel comes in. For up to this point, Jesus seemed level-headed, but I imagine that he was getting a little frustrated that these disciples aren't getting it. So, he pulled out his magic bag filled with hyperbole and metaphors to communicate that inclusivity, serving the least, and striving for peace is the main point. So, Jesus threw in some talk of the absence of God, what common vernacular calls hell, to say how serious disturbing other's good efforts can be. He sprinkled some severed limbs to communicate how horrible it is to distract faithful people from the important work for justice. Jesus added a dash of worms, fire, and salt to remind us that our effort to pursue God's vision for the world is the focus, so don't let the unimportant aspects take center stage.

Unfortunately, I've seen this lack of focus be destructive to a community. Right now, I happen to serve on the synod council for the congregation in the metropolitan Chicago area, and I see this far too often. It only takes a few divisive personalities to tear apart a group of well-meaning Christians. Ignoring injustice, an unwillingness to engage with grace, and one person's pet projects drive the whole church to forget its mission and reason for being. It's the color of the carpet, the font of the bulletin, and the liturgical movements of the leaders that have often brought faithful ministries to an end.

And, Jesus knew how the world works. He knew how easily groups and individuals can slide into doing things not for the sake of following God's vision for the world, but rather into doing whatever the loudest, most stubborn, and most persistent individual has in mind. And Jesus says that following anyone or anything other than that which bears the image and

essence of Christ is destructive. Because Christ's way is about service. Christ's way is centered in love. Christ's way does what is best for all. Christ's way is non-violent. That Christ's way is what brings about abundant life and eternal living.

So, friends, as we journey through this week, go with today's reading reminding us to embody God's vision of love, justice, and peace. Remember to be slow to judge the practices that bring about God's love, justice, and peace. Remember that you are loved and empowered to enact God's vision. And may we be vigilant in seeking God's vision for our community of faith. For, whoever is not against us is for us. Amen.