

September 27, 2009

Psalm 56
Mark 9:38-50

“Whoever is not against us is for us”

I have always cherished verses 38-40 in our Gospel reading for today. The disciples are learning about following Jesus; they are learning to minister as he does- to preach and offer healing in Christ’s name. In this passage they are proudly recounting some of their experiences to Jesus.

John tells him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not one of us.”

This Scripture comforts me. It comforts me because it shows us Jesus’ closest followers could be idiots at times. Even when they were trying to live as Jesus told them to live, to teach and preach his good news, they made mistakes and got things backwards. I am comforted because I know that I do the same thing. I think I’m being faithful, serving Christ, and something shows me I’ve got it all wrong. I am learning it is crucial for us to recognize we might be wrong in life. If we don’t, God can’t do much with us. We need to be willing to be corrected, to be re-oriented, to be changed.

Bill Hybels, Senior Pastor and founder of the Willow Creek community has spoken and written about this reality. He says that in the Christian life there is not just ONE conversion moment, but many. The initial conversion comes as we accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But after that, God reveals truths to us that will change us in many ways. Pastor Hybels named two such conversion moments in a message I heard him give at a seminar I attended early in my ministry here at Baker Memorial. He shared with us that one day God said to him: “Bill, why is nearly everyone who is part of Willow Creek white?” He “woke up” took a look around and realized it was true. From that “conversion” moment, his leadership began to emphasize God’s desire for diversity at Willow. The second “conversion” he described was when God revealed that his ministry was out of balance—doing all possible to help people experience personal transformation through a relationship with Christ-----but very little emphasis was placed on addressing poverty and suffering across the globe. Bill “woke up” to this new vision and began to do all he could to address that imbalance in his church’s ministry.

Jesus heard his disciples' boasting and recognized they needed to "wake up" to some truths. In response to their report that they tried to STOP a man banishing demons tormenting a child of God, Jesus was clear: "DO NOT STOP HIM. If someone is doing the works of mercy and goodness that I would do, DO NOT STOP HIM. Whoever is not against us, is for us."

In commentator Rennie's words, Jesus denounces "wrong-headed attempts to contain the power of Jesus' name and the deliverance it brings."

Jesus used dramatic images to make his disciples face the gravity of what they had done. Jesus' greatest anger, darkest emotions and bitterest tears were shed for those who ignored the suffering of others, especially of the poor, weak, young, old, sick, outcast and vulnerable.

I would not use the kinds of phrases Jesus used with his disciples in this passage. You will never receive a pastoral letter, or read a message in our newsletter or bulletin in which I suggest: "If you cause a brother or sister in Christ to suffer, you should be thrown into Lake Michigan with lead weights around your ankles. If you have done anything physically wrong to another person, you should cut off your hand. If you have wandered into ways of living that are wrong, chop off your foot! If your eyes draw you into sin, rip them out! Caring about people the way Jesus does matters more than anything in life- and when you think you've got a monopoly on truth, and try to stop others from caring actions if they aren't just like you, you're just WRONG!"

I want us to recognize several things here:
Jesus expects us to put his work first in life.
He wants us to embrace others who do his work.
His name and the deliverance it brings are never to be limited by us in any way.

When we mess this up, he is not pleased, and suggests dramatic consequences for our failure.

Christ expects us to weep tears of compassion, yearning for justice and heartbreak over the NEEDLESS suffering in this world. Jesus cares about human tears.

There is a verse in Psalm 56: *You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your record?*” In ancient times people collected tears and preserved them in a tear bottle made of glass, which had a bulbous bottom and a long neck flared at the top to make it possible to collect the tears. (Show my bottle from Israel.)

The chapel built on the Mount of Olives is shaped like a tear bottle, and is dedicated to Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. Some have even suggested that the woman who bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears was pouring out her bottle of tears.

Many of our tears in life are for ourselves, and I know God understands that. He created us as we are, and made us to shed tears.

I was fascinated to learn about a scientific study that analyzed the chemical composition of tears. The results showed that tears shed when we have an object in our eyes- an eyelash or grain of sand--- those tears are different chemically from the tears we shed in sorrow. I believe God MEANS for us to cry. It will help us physically—washing and cleansing us in healing ways.

However, here is the key question: Do we weep tears ONLY for ourselves? Who are the “little ones” God cares about who are suffering or in trouble? Who do we weep for, beyond ourselves? And how do those tears change us, CONVERT us, in ways God needs us to change? How do those tears move us to action?

In one of my first churches I wrestled with some frustration. A church in the city of Chicago was in trouble and had sent an appeal throughout Northern Illinois Conference. This church was in a dangerous neighborhood and they were trying to offer a safe space for children and youth after school. The building had suffered serious water damage, and was in need of costly repairs.

I took this matter to the church’s council. After long discussion and debate it was decided that we should “let the big churches in Chicago take care of helping.” I went home that night somewhat horrified. I had not been able to get them to send even \$25.00 from our little church.

The next weekend, at a youth meeting, I brought the same issue to the young people. I read the letter from the church, which quoted the words of one

child, who missed being able to spend his after school hours in the safe space they provided—he spoke of his fear and the dangers he faced every day coming home from school. One of the girls in the youth group had tears in her eyes. A high school boy asked me, “How much money do we have in our youth account?” We had done fundraising, and at the time had nearly \$200 in a special bank account. When I shared that, another youth asked, “How much do we need to leave there to keep the account open?” I replied, “\$50”. The group voted unanimously to send the Chicago church \$150.00.

Jesus expects us to put his work first in life.
He wants us to embrace others who do his work.
His name and the deliverance it brings are never to be limited by us in any way----

Not in ANY way—not by our lack of compassion
Not by our judgments about others
Not by our desire for our own comfort
Not by our arrogance or conviction our ways are the best or only ways.

Whoever is not against us is for us.
Whoever is doing Christ’s healing work is to be celebrated and encouraged.
Will we be part of that work, embracing the costs as well as the blessings of discipleship?