

Mark 9:38-50 (The Message)

³⁸ John spoke up, “Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn’t in our group.”

³⁹⁻⁴¹ Jesus wasn’t pleased. “Don’t stop him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down. If he’s not an enemy, he’s an ally. Why, anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side. Count on it that God will notice.

⁴² “On the other hand, if you give one of these simple, childlike believers a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you’ll soon wish you hadn’t. You’d be better off dropped in the middle of the lake with a millstone around your neck.

⁴³⁻⁴⁸ “If your hand or your foot gets in God’s way, chop it off and throw it away. You’re better off maimed or lame and alive than the proud owner of two hands and two feet, godless in a furnace of eternal fire. And if your eye distracts you from God, pull it out and throw it away. You’re better off one-eyed and alive than exercising your twenty-twenty vision from inside the fire of hell.

⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰ “Everyone’s going through a refining fire sooner or later, but you’ll be well-preserved, protected from the *eternal* flames. Be preservatives yourselves. Preserve the peace.”

Who's in? Who's Out?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford,
Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Mark 9:38-50*

Today is World Communion Sunday. Later in the service we, along with Christians around the globe, will celebrate a service of communion, one of our two sacraments, the other being baptism. It's pretty amazing, don't you think? Millions and millions together celebrating our common enterprise, celebrating that we are all in this together.

I'd like to take some time this morning to think about this togetherness, for in our world today there seems a small supply of it. I'd like to make a few remarks about how we have gotten to where we are, and then I'd like to think with you what Jesus might have to say to us about it.

In many quarters today being a Christian means belonging to the right club and believing the right thing. If you believe that Jesus is Lord, then you are a Christian and you will be saved. Or, if you believe in adult baptism by immersion, then you're okay. If you believe that God is rightly expressed in the Trinity, that enigmatic co-existent, co-equal, three but one expression of the holy, you're not only on the right track, but you have mastered some version of modern math. If you believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, you've got it right. If you believe that that inerrant word condemns same-sex marriage, then you've really got it right.

Now, these reflect just a few of the in-fights among Christians. These squabbles don't even touch on other faiths. It's clear that for many people, other people who call themselves Christians are on the wrong path. It almost goes without saying that Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, Sikhs and Unitarian Universalists are headed down a terrible road to perdition.

In a world divided in this fashion, in a world convinced by its divisions, the only reasonable course is to convince others to convert and become like us. The unity of world communion Sunday would be realized when we all become the one right thing. There are many so convinced of this truth that when you won't listen to them, they say, I'll pray for you, which means, You are so wrong, and I am so worried for your soul, that I will pray for you; maybe God will convince you and bring you into the fold. Others are less subtle and happily condemn you to your fate.

This morning's scripture passage portrays the disciples expressing a similar point of view. John said to him, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn't in our group." Teacher, this guy was calling himself a Christian, but he's not in our denomination. Teacher, this guy was using your name, but we know he's not one of us. Teacher, shouldn't we beat him up and force him to stop? I mean, what's going to happen to our brand if everyone starts healing people using your good name. Shouldn't we at least sue him for copyright infringement? After all, that's what Harvard

University or Random House Books would do, you know?

Jesus must have rolled his eyes once again. They're almost to Jerusalem now. He's told them three times what awaits them there. They're still thinking it's a club they belong to. Along the way he's eaten and made friends with the outcasts, the ones that the Pharisees and others had rejected. Had they not noticed the implication? He kept opening the door of God's acceptance. But Jesus' closest followers tried to narrow the gate.

"Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn't in our group." And Jesus' answer? "No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down." He goes on to say, "Why, anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side."

Notice the criteria that Jesus uses in deciding about the man. He doesn't check the guy's doctrine. He doesn't say, "Who gave you this authority?" Jesus doesn't need to know anything except that the man is doing something good and powerful. Jesus suggests that someone who is kind enough to give you a cup of water is on your side. Jesus' criteria have nothing to do with beliefs. He wants to know, "What's the man do?" And then the only question that matters is, "Is the man doing a good thing?"

Today many scholars of culture recognize that we are rapidly moving into a new cultural era. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger write in their book, *Emerging Churches*,

"Since the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in AD 313 until approximately the midpoint of the twentieth century, the church occupied a central position within Western societies. This extensive period is referred to as Christendom, during which the church provided both stability and security as a key social institution. A more recent cultural and social element was the emergence of modernity. It began prior to the Renaissance and survived until it too began to fall apart in the twentieth century. Whereas Christendom provided institutional confidence, modernity provided an epistemological certainty based on foundationalism."¹

What Ryan and Bolger mean by modernity and foundationalism is the era of science and reason in which humanity began to believe that all things could be known as certain and undeniable fact. By modernity's lights, there is one real answer to any question. It leads to the rather ridiculous stand-offs between religion and science over such things as the location of the center of the universe in Galileo's time and in our time how creation happened. While the church held a central place in the culture (Christendom) it had enormous power to affect the control the conversations about these truths. "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn't in our group." But that day, is coming to a close. The silly and anti-intellectual elements of religion burn brightly just now, but they are really a consuming fire like unto a supernova star in the throes of death.

Because the landscape has been more or less stable for a long time, those of us born before 1970 or so have a very hard time even grasping the nature and depth of the changes. And because the church has been such a part of the previously static landscape, we may easily underestimate just how irrelevant it has become to many born after the third quarter of the twentieth century. But think of this. It was not long ago, certainly within the memory of

¹Emerging Churches, 17.

many of us here, if you didn't go to church on Sunday, your neighbors raised their eyebrows at you. This morning when you came to church, did you notice? Your neighbors were raising their eyebrows at you, going down the street in your Sunday best, an anachronism. Some want to think it's just a younger generation thing, but it is a much deeper thing than that.

Since the 1960's church participation in the United States and elsewhere has been in precipitous and unabated decline. Our church family and its three former congregations have certainly seen this decline. Especially men and women born after the baby-boom are apt to find the normal forms of church worship to be unsatisfying, so they don't come. In ever-increasing numbers they find both the doctrines and traditions that serve both to unite and divide us to be irrelevant.

The last gasp of the religious right says the problem is the increasing secularization of society, but there's good evidence that it may be just the opposite. Churches have for several decades criticized the "spiritual but not religious" idea as a new-age cop out, a self-indulgent abdication of community. But the truth of the matter is that in this new age, many people derive satisfaction from the spirituality of other and often several religions, so they have little patience with a church that has the one right idea. And they have found in churches more cliques and in-fighting than the widely heralded community.

This picture I have drawn can look pretty daunting and discouraging. And it is in many ways. However, if we reflect on the brief interchange between the disciple John and Jesus, we may see our future. Jesus wanted the disciples to expand their notion of who belonged to their group. And he wanted to clarify what really counted. He said it's all about what we do; it's all about being and doing, and not about believing and secret handshakes.

Good friends, the church we have been will die. The question is, will this new building and our new start just be a supernova, one last bright burning before the death throes? Or will our dying simultaneously be a birth into new life?

I believe that all of us here this morning are committed to new life. I know that's true, even though it may be hard when that new life actually starts happening. Let me share just a few thoughts with you this morning about what I believe our rebirth entails, especially as it relates to this morning's scripture passage.

We will need to be as open-handed as Jesus was in whom he accepted and celebrated. There are many ways for us to celebrate what animates us spiritually and religiously. So, we will practice a radical openness to all who do not seek to destroy us. We welcome, as our many statements say, people of various beliefs, creeds, orientations and capacities. But even more we will freely allow a variety of spiritualities and religious expressions enrich our Christianity. Bring who you are to this place.

As Jesus suggested to the disciples, we are to be about doing the things that Jesus suggested we do. Within the church and without, we are to be about the kinds of things found in his Sermon on the Mount. That is what will mark us as Christians, that we identify with Jesus and what he has taught us.

To be this kind of Christian means that Sunday worship is not the end all and be all of our existence. Sunday worship too often has become a place where Christians come for an hour a week and then go back to some other world. In this new church we are giving birth to, the community will become the kind of community that supports a way of life in church and out of church. So the study groups and everything else we do between worship services

will be at least as important as Sunday morning. That isn't to say we won't put a lot of effort into Sunday morning. We will, but the effort will fit within all the other effort we put into being a community and our lives in general.

That leads us to something many of us may have a harder time with. The division between sacred and secular space will be almost meaningless in this church. Wow! With all the money we have put into this space, it must be clear to us that it is not a space separate from all other space. Rather, we must bring all of life into this church, for all of life is sacred. And what we do here must touch every aspect of our people's lives. We must be relevant to Monday morning. And just as much we must be willing to find the fingerprints of God in the culture outside of these walls. God is not only still speaking, but God speaks in the homeless woman in Porter Square, in movies in the theater, in your cubicle at work. There is not a place where God doesn't leave a mark.

Finally, although I feel as though I've barely begun, a church community described as I just have is a church community in which everyone has a ministry. Nobody's going to say, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn't in our group." Get out there everyone and expel some demons, bring a cup of water to someone, go to the outdoor church, lead a study group, bring your prayers, bring your music, bring your heart, bring your own forms of spirituality and learn some forms here, too. Bring your questions. As our upcoming study group says, we are going to be about living the questions as much as any answers. There's plenty of room for all of us not only to fit but to contribute. Come let us, in the words of Jesus, let us lose our lives for the Gospel's sake, that we and this church may find life. Amen.