

"Not Following Us"
Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday in Kingdomtide
Lectionary Year B
September 27, 2009
Text: Mark 9:38-41
Dr. David T. Howeth

"Tick, tock the game is locked, and nobody else can play." Did you ever hear that growing up? It is the mantra of exclusion. It is the essence of the idea that whatever circle it is, it does not include you. It is the clearest and most concise statement of an "us versus them" mentality.

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, we see Jesus' disciples attempting to play "tick, tock the game is locked." It seems that they had encountered someone performing miracles in Jesus' name. Whoever this person was, he apparently was exorcising demons quite effectively, most likely because he was doing it in the right way, in the name and spirit of Jesus. So what is the problem, and why are the disciples so furious?

Keep in mind that just a short time before, they fail miserably to cast out an evil spirit from a boy. Jesus has to step in and do it for them. After that embarrassing incident the disciples may have sought to soothe their pain by convincing themselves that no one really was capable of such a miracle except for Jesus himself, a rationalization

that is quickly nullified when the disciples discover some ordinary guy who is able to do what they are not.

And even before they run across this "other exorcist," the disciples are embarrassed even further when Jesus catches them trying to take their anger out on each other by arguing among themselves over who is the greatest. The Lord sets a child in front of them to instruct them that they should be more like someone with no status whatsoever, because in the kingdom of God the first must be the last of all and servant of all.

And right on the heels of these humiliations, all brought on by the disciples' own inadequacies, along comes this miracle-working stranger who shows them up big time. So what is the disciples' response? Are they thrilled to see the work of the Lord being done? Are they rejoicing that people are being healed? Are they celebrating that the power of Jesus' name is being invoked appropriately with amazing results? Are they congratulating the person responsible for this wonderful work and telling him how proud they are of the success of his ministry?

No. Not hardly. They try as hard as they can to stop him and explain to Jesus their reason for their disciplinary action: "He is not following us. He's not one of us, Jesus. He doesn't live in our neighborhood. He doesn't go to our school. We didn't vote him into the

fraternity. He is outside our circle." And Jesus goes right along with them, right? He says in response to their complaint, "You guys are exactly right in trying to put this clown out of business. Ours is the only game in town. He's way out of bounds. He is stepping on our turf and stealing our spotlight. We just can't have that."

No. Not even close. Jesus says that the disciples are not to prevent the man from doing the obvious good he is doing for obviously the right reason and in obviously the correct manner. If the man is not against them, which apparently he is not, then he must be for them. Jesus goes on to suggest that the proof is in the pudding, so to speak. The fact that the man is being successful at what he is doing in Jesus' name indicates that the man's heart and his faith are in the right place. He is to be left alone and unhindered so that he may continue to bring honor to the name of Christ through his effective ministry in Jesus' name.

In my opinion, one of the real mistakes the Church has made throughout its history is to confuse the following of *Jesus* with the following of *us*. The other exorcist in this story was following Jesus. That's why he was able to function as a legitimate healer. But he wasn't following the disciples. He wasn't one of them. That is the trap the Church has fallen into time and time again. With regard to what it means to be a genuine and authentic follower of Christ, the Church has

tried to tell the world so many times and in so many ways, "If you are not *ours*, you can't be *his*; if you don't belong to *us*, you can't belong to *him*."

It started in the third century, with the statement the Church would declare as dogma, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, "Outside the Church there is no salvation." When the Church was still in its relative infancy, when it had gained only enough power and control to know it had to have more, the Church let the world know that there was absolutely no way to God except through its doors. It held the keys to the kingdom. It and only it was the gatekeeper. If you wanted to have a right relationship with God, you better be right with the Church. If you wanted your sins forgiven, you better be giving the Church your undivided attention. Your eternal destiny depended entirely on where you were on Sunday morning. Tick, tock the game is locked. We who are professional ministers in the modern church refer to those as the good old days.

The one true Church, Catholic and apostolic, was able to hold that line drawn in the sand for thirteen centuries, until the Protestant Reformation. That threw a monkey wrench into things. Once the Lutherans separated from the Roman Church, followed by the Reformed Church, the Anglican Church, the Radical Reformers such as the Anabaptists and such, the question became, "Which church?"

Outside of *which* church is there no salvation? The war was on. Each faction within Christendom held tightly to its belief it was the only genuine article, with schism after schism taking place until ultimately the Church came to resemble the result of branch banking, a different one on every corner, each claiming to be better than the one on every other corner.

I grew up with a father who honestly and earnestly believed that the only way to be a legitimate Christian, a true follower of Jesus Christ, was to be Southern Baptist. He was die hard and hard shell. For that reason I was not allowed to go to any other churches in town. I even was not permitted to date a Catholic girl, because my father considered them to be the worst of all threats to the true faith. He could and would list everything that was wrong with every other Christian tradition, because there was something seriously lacking in all of them. To be anything other than Southern Baptist was heretical and could be seen as apostasy. So I grew up knowing nothing, absolutely nothing of any Christian tradition other than my own.

Until . . . Dave Tanner invited me to go with him to attend a church camp during the summer before my junior year in high school. Tanner was the only person my dad trusted enough to put my soul and my eternal destination under his care. Dave also knew my father well enough not to give him too much information about the camp

beforehand. As it turned out, it was an ecumenical summer camp, put on by the Texas Ecumenical Youth Council. Since my father believed that anything ecumenical was of the devil, the open and inclusive nature of the camp was one detail Dave was sure to leave out. The experience I had at that camp changed my life, because it set me on a path that led me to where I am today.

The camp featured ministers from all the mainline Protestant churches—Methodist, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian. There even was a Catholic priest. We had discussion groups that focused on what these denominations held in common and what made each distinctive. The experience I had that week opened my eyes to a larger understanding of the Church universal. I gained an appreciation for other traditions, and I realized how much I was missing out on, particularly when it came to worship and liturgy. I found out how meaningful other expressions of the Christian faith were, and I became determined at that point to continue to seek, to question, to explore, to examine, to experiment.

I made a commitment to grow and develop in my Christian faith by incorporating the worthwhile offerings from other churches into my own understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. That's why I have degrees from three different denominational seminaries. It's why I'm a United Methodist minister, but it is also why

I feel at home worshipping with such divergent congregations as Royal Lane Baptist and St. Matthias' Anglican.

What I've learned is that a true disciple of Jesus needs to maintain a balance between conviction and tolerance. What that means for me is that I am a Christian in general *by conviction* and a United Methodist Christian specifically *by conviction*. I have chosen these particular ways of serving God, because I feel that they are right *for me*. Being a United Methodist Christian is the way that best works for me to have a meaningful relationship with God—loving him with my whole being and my neighbor as myself. This is the path I have decided on. This is the journey on which I have embarked. This is my preferred spiritual pilgrimage. For me, this is how I have decided to experience the way, the truth, and the life, and I do so with all the conviction I have.

But I also am tolerant. That means I don't judge other people's choices as to their paths, their journeys, their pilgrimages, their ways of seeking to know God. I may be willing to argue for the *superiority* of the tradition of which I am a part, but I am not going to argue for its *exclusivity*. Just because it's the only way for me doesn't mean it's the only way. I am willing to say that following *Christ* does not have to mean following *us as United Methodist Christians*, as committed to our tradition as I am. For me, following us is not the same as following him.

There is more than one way to do that, even if it is in a way far different than the way we do.

I suggest that we avoid trying to play tick, tock the game is locked. I believe we need to exercise the utmost care when being critical of other faith traditions. After all, the goal of being a Christian is to become more like Christ. And let's face it, there are some extremely Christlike people in every Christian tradition and even some non-Christian traditions, just like there are plenty of people who claim to be Christian but who aren't the least bit Christlike. As was true with the healer who was not following the disciples, he earned the respect of Jesus himself because of the healer's effectiveness. He was being Christlike in doing the things Jesus did, even if he was not counted among Jesus' disciples. May we not fall into the same trap the disciples did and that the Church has throughout its history: being more concerned about who is not following *us* than we are about who is following *Christ*.