

“Who is ‘Us’?”
Mark 9:38-50
Sunday, September 27, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

As most of you are aware, there is a committee hard at work getting the parsonage ready for me to move into. I am very grateful to Bill Frank and his committee for all they are doing in that regard. Pat is helping me choose colors; Delora is helping me select appliances; Sunny & Bill are juggling multiple contractors; June is giving advice -- and some chairs she’s been saving from when pastors used to live in the parsonage. Others among you have offered help and support in many ways – prayers... furniture... advice...parsonage stories from the past.

That being said, I laughed outloud when I came across this old story, and had to share it with you:

As the story goes, there was a pastor who was supposedly a great lover of children. One day he looked at the sidewalk leading up to the parsonage; it had been freshly poured. Some children were playing in it and leaving footprints in the fresh cement. He rushed out and yelled at them.

Someone said to him, “Pastor! We thought you liked children!”

He said, “Yes...I love them in the abstract -- but not in the concrete!”

Bill – if the parsonage committee ever decides cement needs to be poured, I would be happy to have children’s hand prints and footprints in it. They could even sign their names and put a date on their artwork. Dawn – maybe we could give permission to the Sunday School leaders, to make this a Sunday School project!

“The world is looking for concrete demonstrations of Christian love in action” (King Duncan).

I. Defining “us” (boundary setting)

In today’s gospel reading, the disciples complain because someone who is not one of “us” is healing people in Jesus’ name! My Bible calls it “casting out demons.” How dare they! “Teacher,” the disciples cry, “...we tried to stop him, because he was not following us” (v. 38). He’s not one of us.

But Jesus responds, “Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward” (vv. 40-41).

Jesus wants to include more folks than the disciples do.

So how do we define “us”? How do we set boundaries on offering concrete demonstrations of Christian love in action? The rule we operate under is that everyone is welcome in our church. Everyone is welcome at Christ’s table. We follow the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger.

But in a practical sense, we cannot include everyone here at San Gabriel First United Methodist Church. We must define who we are. Who is “us”? And, by correlation, who is not us.

I’m just beginning to get to know you; learning about your wonderful history. You are just beginning to get to know me.

One thing I see in this church is that you do welcome the stranger. Your doors are truly open to whoever wants to enter. You do the work of demonstrating concrete Christian love across the boundaries of race and culture and many other social barriers.

I think, as we try to define “us,” one of the first criteria is this:

1. A person must want to be one of us in order to become one of us.

It's a matter of choice.

The man in today's gospel reading wants to be "one of us." He wants to be one of Jesus' followers.

My husband, Roy, when we were dating, wanted to become one of the Snapp family. Or at least, he wanted to meet my parents, meet the family.

We each flew home to the Midwest – Roy to the Chicago area where his family lives, and I to Clare, Michigan, 200 miles north of Detroit. It was the dead of winter.

A terrible snowstorm hit during our visit. The plan was for Roy to drive up to meet my folks for the first time. This would've been at least a six hour drive in the best of circumstances. In the midst of an historic winter storm, it was a life-threatening, slow-crawling saga of a journey. Picture Gandalf and the hobbits on the mountain in a blinding blizzard with avalanches of snow falling to bury them.

Roy called. "Do you still want me to come?" "Yes!" I cried, without a moment's hesitation. Ah, young love...

Then we turned on the radio and began to hear of all the accidents and road closings and dire warnings to stay home except in case of extreme emergency. The ever-worsening radio reports described near-zero visibility, ice, pile-ups, accidents, waist-deep drifting snow, wind and sleet and heavy snow continually falling. Even the snow plows were having trouble maneuvering.

I remember Mom's eyes softening as she saw the worry and the tears in my own eyes. This was the '80's, by the way; no cell phones. Hard to remember; how did we function?

Hours, lifetimes later, Roy finally arrived safely. I hugged him fiercely and wouldn't let go.

Meanwhile, my loving family -- in a “joke” that Roy remembers to this day -- gave him a big, unison “thumbs down.” He may have risked life and limb to drive hours through a deadly snow storm to meet them. But he was not “one of us.” He was not a Snapp.

What is required for a newcomer to be welcomed as one of “us?” How much suffering and effort is required for an outsider to prove themselves?

In Clare, where my folks lived at the time – Dad still lives there – my family will always be “those new folks from Detroit who bought the old Eberhard place.” The Eberhards are an extended family who have farmed the land around Clare for generations. Dad has lived in Clare for 47 years. He will never belong, in the eyes of some folks. How long does it take for a newcomer to become one of “us?” What are the rules of belonging in the family of God?

Well, besides the desire to belong, according to our text:

2. A person who wants to be one of us must claim the name.

The disciples report that someone is doing good deeds “in Jesus’ name.” They are offended. Only the disciples have been authorized to call on the name of Jesus Christ to heal and cast out demons.

Again, Jesus corrects them: “Whoever is not against us is for us” (v. 40).

Just because the man doesn’t travel with Jesus and camp out with him and sit at his feet, that doesn’t mean he isn’t a true follower; that doesn’t mean he isn’t “one of us.”

There’s an old Confirmation curriculum entitled “Claim the Name.” Confirmands spend weeks and weeks learning about what it means to make an adult decision to claim the name of Jesus, to make an adult decision to be one of us.

The man in our story claims the name, and that’s enough for Jesus.

The keynote speaker at last week’s Clergy Convocation was Enuma Okoro, a writer and

public speaker of Nigerian heritage. She was born in New York City.

Okoro talked about the concept of “crossing boundaries.” When we make the choice to befriend a person who is different from ourselves – whatever the difference may be – we make a decision to cross a boundary. We cross a racial boundary. Or a gender boundary. An age boundary. An educational boundary. An economic boundary.

When Jesus came to live among us in the flesh, He crossed a boundary.

Setting aside his divinity, he “emptied himself,” it says in Philippians chapter 2. He “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” He crossed the boundary between divinity and humanity, “and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:5-11).

This is the name we claim, as Christians. And in claiming that name, we commit ourselves to crossing boundaries, as he crossed the boundary from divinity to humanity in order to be “one of us.”

Crossing boundaries between “us” and “them” is a key aspect of what it means to be a Christian. It’s the DNA of our heritage, our inheritance from the Jews and from Jesus, our Jewish Lord, Savior, King and friend.

Love is a choice. Christian love is a choice to love across boundaries. Now here at San Gabriel you may think I’m talking about the boundaries between Anglo and Chinese and Japanese and other ethnicities. And I am. Of course I’m talking about those boundaries. There are so many racial-ethnic groups in greater L. A.; the cultural divides are there.

But every time we befriend another person – even a person of the same ethnic heritage – we cross a boundary. I am different from you. You are different from me. We are different from the others around us here this morning. We are different and we are separated from each other by a gulf of individual experiences and perspectives and circumstances.

In the church, we choose to be brave. We choose to step across that boundary. We choose to risk reaching out to another person in friendship. We do it because Jesus did it. Jesus crossed the boundary, came to earth, befriended us. Jesus is different from you and me. Very different. You and I are very different from Him. He has chosen to disregard those differences. He has chosen to ignore those boundaries. He has chosen to come down on the side of love.

II. Defining “not us” (more boundary setting)

Roy will probably never truly be accepted as “us” by the Snapp clan. The Snapp family will most certainly never be accepted as “us” by the farming families of Clare, Michigan.

In God’s family, we all belong. There is no “them.” There is only “us.” Everyone is welcome. The Table is open. We welcome the stranger.

Still, there are rules for becoming one of “us”: 1) You have to make a decision; you have to want to be one of us, and 2) you must claim the name of Jesus.

So how do we set boundaries? How do we define who is not us.

Well, it’s simple, really. Not easy, but simple:

1. If you don’t want to be one of us, you are not one of us. We won’t force you. We may invite you. We may show you so much concrete love in action that you can’t help but want to one of us. But we won’t force you.

2. If you don’t claim the name of Jesus, you are not one of us. We can still be friends. We can treat you with respect; you can treat us with respect. But if you don’t claim the

name of Jesus, you are not one of us.

I would add a third item to the “not us” category.

We are all sinners in need of God’s forgiveness and in need of the forgiveness of those we have sinned against. But:

3. Any person who persists in sin, does not repent, and causes disruption in the fellowship of the church family, is not one of us.

One example of this would be a person who is verbally or physically abusive to family members or church members. I suspect you can think of other examples.

Matthew 18 gives us a process for dealing with such folks:

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18.15-17).

Just because we are called to be open to all people, welcoming to the stranger – this does not mean we are called to be doormats. People who persist in bad behavior are not “one of us.” We work at reconciliation, using the Matthew 18 process. If this doesn’t work, we shake off the dust. We send that person packing.

But for persons who sincerely work at getting along, despite inevitable hurts and misunderstandings along the way; for persons who forgive and seek forgiveness and sincerely seek God’s help in doing better next time – such persons are “us.” They belong.

Closing.

The name of E. Stanley Jones is familiar to most long-time Methodists. He was a missionary-evangelist who traveled around the world for many, many years, especially in India, proclaiming the good news of God's love in Christ Jesus. He lived a life of joy and peace that came from his faith. In his 90's, E. Stanley Jones wrote his autobiography. In the introduction, he says, "How did it all happen? I asked myself that question as I sat in a hotel room in Alaska writing. I looked up and saw myself in a looking glass and said to myself, 'Stanley Jones, you're a very happy man, aren't you?' I replied, 'Yes, I am.' And then the vital question: 'How did you get this way?' And my reply: 'I don't know. It is all a surprise to me, a growing surprise. I walked across a field one day, and I stubbed my toe against the edge of a treasure chest, jutting out of the earth. 'It's treasure,' I cried. Ran off and sold all that I had, including myself, and bought that field; and I've been hugging myself ever since that I had sense enough to do it!'"

(A Song of Ascents, E. Stanley Jones, p. 24; as quoted by Donald B. Strobe).

Go and do likewise.

Amen.