

Sermon: PENTECOST 18, September 27, 2015

In the Name...

A young lawyer was keen to secure a place in a professional association and everything was going well with his interview until he was asked about his family background. Not wanting to admit had a great uncle who had been executed for murder, he said, "Well, my great uncle was given a chair of electrical engineering at a state institution and his sudden death came as a shock."

Few of us go through life without ever joining, or wanting to join, some kind of group or club. Many people take pride in belonging to a whole range and, for some, the more exclusive the better. In the 1950's, the movie star Victor Mature, known for his leaden romantic leads, applied for membership in a certain country club. When told that actors weren't accepted, he replied, "I'm no actor. Haven't you seen my movies?" Then again, when the comedian Groucho Marx learned that he had been nominated for an even more prestigious society, his famous response was that he'd never belong to any club that would accept the likes of him.

Being in a group is proof of how others accept us and affirming of how we see ourselves. The story, for example, is told of the homeless person who visited a Baptist Church and was given a new suit of clothes to wear. But, he decided it was such a good-looking suit that the next Sunday he went to an Episcopal Church.

In today's Gospel, the disciples of Jesus are furious to discover a minister who doesn't belong to "their" club. "Master", John protests, "we saw a man who is not one of us casting out demons in your name." Now, why should they care? What business is it of theirs?

Well, you see, the disciples feel threatened. Consider what's been happening to them in this chapter. First, they fail to heal a sick boy and are publicly humiliated. Then, last week, as the argument about who's greatest among them gets to the point where they're barely speaking to each other, Jesus scolds them by saying that little kids have a better attitude to life than they do.

They're not exactly getting a lot of warm fuzzies at this point. But, now, they can suddenly unite around a common enemy. Surely, Jesus would have to agree they're doing the right thing.

Wrong. Jesus commands them to leave the guy alone. "Anyone who is not against us", he says, "is for us."

Our Old Testament lesson portrays a similar scenario. As we heard, Moses chose 70 elders to assist him in providing leadership. To begin their new ministries, he had them meet him at the Tent of the Ark of the Covenant, which was just outside the main camp. There they would receive, from God, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Well, the Spirit comes, but for some reason, and we don't know why, two of the chosen 70 were still in the camp. Maybe they overslept or had to deal with a last-minute crisis of some sort. In

any event, they weren't at the Tent with the others, but, God filled them with his Spirit all the same.

And this upset Joshua because this was setting a bad example. People who weren't following the rules were receiving blessings. And what did Moses say? Wonderful! I wish everybody was a prophet!

The underlying issue that Joshua and the disciples had was that old one of greatness, of exclusivity. If we try to control how God works, if we try to set limits or make conditions, then we're displaying pride. Jesus, however, wanted his disciples to display humility and humility is best displayed through tolerance.

Christian tolerance, though, is not moral weakness or a lazy acceptance of whatever the latest fad may be. Jesus never promoted an "anything goes" attitude, and Christian tolerance is a reverence for a capital "T" Truth that's always bigger than we are. It's a respect for the freedom of God to move in the ways He chooses and an openness to accept it when it happens. Tolerance is recognizing that God may use people I don't like, or agree with, to accomplish His Will.

Many lament that God no longer seems to have a place in our world today. Well, maybe because they're looking in the wrong places. Maybe if they looked beyond the Tent of the Ark, and beyond those who belong to our their group or share their opinions or follow their rules, it might surprise them to see that God is just as active in our world today as He has always been. He may be working with those they regard as the wrong people, and in places they deem to be the wrong places. But, the irrefutable fact is that He's working.

What did that unauthorized exorcist believe about Jesus? Did he consider him the Second Person of the Holy Trinity? Did he accept him as the Virgin-born Saviour of the World? Probably not, since not even the disciples did at that point. Was that exorcist leading a moral lifestyle? Possibly not, since he seemed to be conducting his free-lance healing ministry for personal gain. So, and here's the key thing, can God work through the ministry of an immoral heretic?

Now that's a question that vexes a lot of people. Can God work through the ministry of an immoral heretic? I sure hope so, because I'm not 100% sin-free or 100% theologically flawless. Of course, my sins aren't as bad as yours - I mean others. And I've read a lot of books, but, what's the standard? 90 percent, 80, 25? And who measures it, anyway?

Jesus knew conflict would erupt among his followers whenever we consider our ways of "doing church" to be better than everyone else's. He knew conflict would arise when we put ourselves up on a pedestal and say we're more faithful than others. He knew conflict would result when truly sincere and dedicated people do not recognize the sincerity of others.

But, the fact is that no matter how different we may seem to be to one another, God considers us all pretty much the same. And when we work in the Name of Jesus we're working together. Like it or not.

As a nation, Americans take pride that we have Arabs and Jews, Indians and Pakistanis, Chinese and Japanese, living right next door to each other without trying to blow each other up. It's a model other nations envy and aspire to achieve. As Christians, can we model anything less?

Yes, indeed, each one of us here is a very special person. We belong to a very special club. Ministers in the Name of Jesus. And, here's the really amazing part - we're not the only members of that club.

In the Name...