

The Gospel this morning continues on with Jesus in the house in Capernaum teaching his disciples how they are to act as his followers. He has just told them that, "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9: 35) Jesus has taken a child and told his disciples that they are to support those who come to follow Jesus with the wonder of a child. They are to welcome and support those who are on the margins of society, those who come to Jesus, but have no power or status in society. This is what the Body of Christ will look like once Jesus has been raised from the dead.

John immediately speaks up and tells Jesus how someone who wasn't a disciple of Jesus was healing people in Jesus' name. John says, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." (Mark 9: 38) Instead of being glad that a person found the healing that they needed, John is indignant that some outsider is using Jesus' name! He's not one of us! Apparently, John hasn't been listening. Maybe he was too busy ruminating on how to stop people who were not followers of Jesus from doing healings in his name. John and his brother are the two that will ask to sit at Jesus' right hand; they are still seeing the world through the eyes of the world with its power and status. Jesus reply to John is, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." (Mark 9: 39-40) Jesus isn't concerned with who is in and who is out of the group. If someone is using his name to bring healing and reconciliation into the world, good! Don't stop them! The disciples want to know who is in and who is out. Jesus tells them that their way of thinking is not the way of the kingdom of God. Jesus then uses hyperbole to make it very clear to his disciples that he is not interested in putting up fences and rules on how to follow him. Jesus says, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." (Mark 9: 42) He then continues on with how if various parts of the body are causing you to sin to cut it off. It is pretty gruesome stuff. Jesus is using metaphors as he did with the child. He is using the metaphor of a body to show how those who follow him are members of His Body. Just as Paul will use the image of the Body of Christ in his letters to refer to those who follow Christ. Hell in this context is Gehenna, which was a continually burning garbage heap outside of Jerusalem, another metaphor. Our image of hell actually comes from Dante's book, the *Inferno*. C.S. Lewis, among other theologians offers a concept of hell as one where the individual has chosen to reject God's freely offered love and grace.

Another way to think of what Jesus is saying is that, if a disciple puts an obstacle in the way of a seeker's growth in faith in Jesus, that disciple needs to be reprimanded or removed from the Body of Christ. There are to be no obstacles preventing people from coming to Christ.

The disciples never did fully comprehend what Jesus was saying to them. One of the themes of the *Gospel according to Mark* is discipleship failure. As the church grew each congregation differed from one another as to how to be the Body of Christ. In Paul's Letters to the Corinthians he constantly has to tell them how to behave towards each other and those who want to come to know Jesus. Paul begins his First Letter to the

Corinthians by asking them to be united in one mind and purpose for it had been reported to him by Chloe's people that there were quarrels among them about who had the proper teachings, Paul, Apollo, or Cephas. He tells them that, "I planted, Apollo watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." (1Cor. 3:6-7)

Over the centuries Christians developed different spiritualities, different paths to knowing Christ. Unfortunately, Christians ended up killing each other, because each denomination thought that they had the only true way to know Christ. Instead of working together to promote the Kingdom of God in the world, they went to war against each other. Even today different branches of Christianity believe that they have the "only" way. So too many Christians spend their energy looking at what divides them and putting up doctoral obstacles so that those who come seeking Christ walk away. This is exactly what Jesus was condemning! I found a poster that I put up at the Canterbury Center at Old Dominion University when I was the Episcopal Campus Minister there that said, "Let us feed the hungry, house the homeless, stop the killing, and provide medicine for the sick. When we have accomplished that, we can sit around and argue about religion." Jesus kept feeding the hungry, healing the sick and restoring people to their communities and he taught his disciples to do the same. Jesus brought people together, he did not put up obstacles to following him. But to follow Jesus requires being willing to risk that the way you see the world is not God's way of perceiving the world. We are very good at putting up walls to divide us as human beings, or thinking my group, my country is better than another. We are very good at being gate keepers, but what if the Spirit is doing something new and shows up in unexpected places, like the man healing people in Jesus' name. But he isn't one of us, the disciples cry! No he isn't, that is the point that Jesus is making. Be open to where the Spirit is and support the work of the Spirit of God alive in the world.

Christians are to come together to share God's love with the world. Christians are to come together to feed the hungry, help the homeless, stop the killing and connect people to the city services that they need. I wonder what partnerships the Spirit of Christ is calling us to connect into within our own church neighborhood? As the Cohort Team this past week looked at the census of the people who live around the church, the majority are Hispanic and Asian. How is God calling us to use our grounds and buildings our church's resources to reach out to our community? To use the abundance that Christ has given us as his church. Instead of looking at our differences that cause us to stumble as Christians, let us look at what we can do together to promote everyone's wellbeing in our neighborhood.

As Madeleine L'Engle wrote, "We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it." That is what Jesus wanted his disciples to be in the world. May we set aside our differences to be the light of Christ in the world.