

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 26, 2021
First Lutheran Church
St. Joseph, MO
Pastor Keith Hohly

Grace and Peace to you this day in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Perhaps it is because I just played in the Blessings Abound Golf Benefit last Monday, but the gospel this morning reminds me of a scene from the movie *Caddyshack* in which two golfers meet in the locker room of a club house. One is coming in from finishing his round of golf, the other is getting ready to go out and play. This second one is a rather competitive sort, so, he asks the first what he shot – what was his score for his round of golf. The one who just finished replies: “Oh, I don’t know – I never keep score.” With a somewhat incredulous look on his face the other man asks: “You never keep score? Well, then, how do you measure yourself against other golfers?” The first looks at him with a wry smile and says: “By height.”

Jesus, I think, in the gospel this morning is calling us to measure ourselves against each other in a way different from the way we often do. Perhaps said in a better way, he is calling into question the way we normally esteem one another.

In today’s story, the disciples run across an exorcist who is casting demons out of people in Jesus’ name. The problem is the disciples esteem this exorcist as something of a rogue – he is not a card-carrying member of the disciples’ union – he is not properly one of Jesus’ followers. So, the true disciples try to stop him. Jesus tells them not to stop him. He says to the disciples: “Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink ... will by no means lose the reward.”

“Whoever is not against us is for us.” Jesus’ response seems to imply that even those who are not properly part of the group maybe really are. The measure is not so much the club to which you belong, it is the ministry that you do. Those doing the work of Christ – those serving others in Christ’s name – these, too, will receive the reward. As the rest of this gospel seems to indicate, this reward is being part of the kingdom of God.

But this method of measuring ourselves, and the implications of Jesus’ response to his disciples here, has been difficult for the church over the years. It seems as though it may have been difficult very early on as well.

The reading we hear this morning is from the gospel of Mark. Most scholars believe Mark was the first gospel written. The other three were written later, and it may well be that at least two of them – Matthew and Luke – were written with a copy of Mark’s gospel before them. Matthew and Luke are often viewed as expansions, or at times even corrections, of the accounts of Jesus’ life as recorded in Mark.

When Matthew comes to these words of Jesus we hear this morning, these words about those not being against us are for us, things change. Matthew switches the wording around. Instead of

“whoever is not against us is for us,” Matthew has “whoever is not for us is against us.” The change may seem subtle, but it has a lot to say about those who might be on the margins of the church. For Mark, if you are not clearly opposed to Jesus and you are in fact doing the work of Jesus, then you are in. For Matthew, unless you are clearly part of the group, unless you are really for us and part of us, then you must be against us. Mark seems to leave things somewhat open. There’s more room for diversity within the group. Matthew seems to want a more narrowly defined understanding.

Luke, on the other hand, must have been a Lutheran. He records the statement both ways. At one point it’s “whoever is not against you is for you.” But then, a little later in the gospel, it becomes: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” Maybe Luke isn’t really sure which it is. Maybe he’s a little confused, so, he puts them both in for good measure. Sounds like some of the social statements our church has written over the years. We describe the various positions possible on an issue, yet because we have a variety of opinions on them within our church, we don’t say that just one is correct.

But my point here is that the church seemed to have problems very early on, even in the first century, with the way we understand and measure each other – particularly with the way we understand who is part of the church and even part of the kingdom, and who is not. And it continues to be a problem for us.

Whether we are talking about a denomination that claims it alone has the ability to offer God’s salvation to people, or one like our own that this is not of one mind about social issues and church policies, faith communities struggle over issues of diversity. It might be easier for us if we had only Mark’s understanding, or if we had only Matthew’s. As it is, Luke is a reminder that we have both.

How will we go forward? Perhaps the very last line of this gospel today provides a guide. Jesus calls us at the end to “be at peace with one another.” This peace is not about trying to keep everybody happy, or of being of one mind in all things, as if these things are really something we could achieve. The peace to which Jesus refers has to do with the wholeness of God. This wholeness – this shalom of God – is what the kingdom is all about. What are the things that will make for this peace? That’s the decision Jesus is calling us to really face. What are the things that lead us into the wholeness of God? That’s the discernment the church is called to perceive.

It would be good for all of us to pray for such discernment and such wholeness. In the second of today’s lessons, James calls us to believe that the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. So, pray for the whole people of God. Pray that we might find wholeness, not simply agreement, among ourselves.