Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 26, 2021

Neal MacPherson

THE GOOD OUTSIDE Numbers 11: 4–6, 10–17, 24–30

Mark 9:38–41

May God’s grace and peace be with us this day.

What a great story that is from the Book of Numbers. In order to demonstrate the need to share his leadership with others, and under the direction of God, Moses took seventy men from the camp and placed them around the tent, which housed the Ten Commandments. And God descended from a cloud and transferred some of the spirit that rested upon Moses to the seventy, so that all of them began to prophesy. Two men, Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp, and the spirit rested on them as well. And because they had not gone out to the tent, they prophesied in the camp. A young man comes to Moses and reports, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” Then Joshua, assistant to Moses, pleads, “My Lord Moses, stop them!” But Moses refused, and said, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”

Perhaps Mark had this story in mind when he told the story we heard in this morning’s reading from the Gospel. The story relates the time when the disciples report to Jesus that a man was doing deeds of power apart from their community. Just as Joshua had asked Moses to put a stop to the two men prophesying in the camp, John asks Jesus to stop the man outside the community from doing his deeds of power. Like Moses, Jesus refuses, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” (Mk 9:39–40).

You have probably already noted that there is a common theme in these two stories. Both stories emphasize the good being done *outside* the community. In the story from Numbers it is Eldad and Medad who are prophesying outside the camp. In the story from Mark, it is the man who was casting out demons who was outside the group of named disciples. Hence the title of this sermon, “The Good Outside.”

The story from Mark’s Gospel is an important story for our time. For we live in a time of deep conflict between peoples and nations. Christians mistrust other Christians. Republicans and Democrats are deeply divided. Many Christians view Muslims as enemies. Anti-American sentiment is rampant in the Middle East. Israel opposes Iran and Iran stands apart from many nations. And we could go on and on.

In such a world, groups tend to keep to themselves, and begin to believe that truth belongs only to them. This group mentality is prevalent in our time, but it also has been present throughout human history. Here in our story from Mark we have the group of Jesus’ disciples. The disciples want to preserve the life of their group by insisting that only they have the power to do God’s work in the name of Jesus. They want to identify themselves over against others. Good cannot be done outside themselves. But they are sadly mistaken. God is free to use anyone to fulfill God’s own purposes in the world.

The language used by the disciples reveals the shallowness of their understanding. John complained that the healer outside the community of disciples was not following *them*. But the disciples should not be *followed*; they should *follow*. They should themselves seek to do the will of God. We all, it seems, want to be followed, but no one wants to be a follower.

But their most serious misunderstanding, I would suggest, has to do with God’s freedom. Whenever we say that we have the truth over against others, whenever we say that we alone are doing the will of God, whenever we say that God is on our side, whenever we write other people off, then we are limiting the freedom of God, for God is free to work through anyone God chooses.

There is much good being done in our world through people who are not Christian. In a previous generation, it was the Hindu Mahatma Gandhi who did much good in the world in his own time. In our time, we have the Dalai Lama, a Tibetan Buddhist, who travels throughout the world promoting the way of peace and understanding between people. We also have Malala Yousafzai, the young Muslim woman who advocates for education and opportunity for young Muslim women in their restrictive societies. We also have people like Robin Wall Kimmerer who, from the perspective of indigenous spiritual understanding and scientific knowledge, writes about the relationship we have with the creation, and especially the world of plants. Her lovely book is called *“Braiding Sweetgrass”*, and we are reading it together in our Wednesday evening study group meeting on Zoom. Robin Kimmerer enriches our Christian understanding of our relationship to the earth and our need to be faithful stewards of the natural order, which God has given us as a gift.

It would be a deep misunderstanding of the nature of God to say that God is *not* using these people to further God’s own purposes in the world. Yes, there is much good being done in the world outside the Christian community. Such good work does not decrease the work of the Christian community. The Dalai Lama, Malala Yousafzai, and Robin Kimmerer do not oppose the work of Christ in the world. They honor the best of Christian tradition in their words and writing. Said Jesus to John, “Who is not against us is for us.”

What a different world it would be if everyone were to take this morning’s story to heart. We would be not so divided as a people. There would be a greater spirit of harmony in the world and co-operation among people. We would be so much more open to the goodness present in others. We would be far less judgmental than we are. Even though we believe that the Christian way is the way for us, we would be less apt to say, “Christianity is the only true religion in the world.” We would cease to claim that the United States of America is the greatest nation in the world. Say that to a Canadian and see what response you get!

Moreover, as Christians, we would not be as concerned about the faithfulness of others as we would be concerned about our own faithfulness. We would seek not to be followed but to follow. And we would also have a much humbler view of ourselves. It is humbling to know that God in freedom can choose to work through others not only alongside of us, but perhaps *instead* of us.

Take the story of the Babylonian exile of the sixth century before the Common Era. The people of Israel were in exile in the city of Babylon. Who would lead them home to Palestine at the end of their fifty years of being away from home? Would God choose one of their own to lead them back? No, God chose a Gentile, Cyrus the Persian, to lead the people back to Palestine. If God so chooses, people outside the community can do works of goodness in the world.

In other words, God does not need us or the church for that matter! The church surely needs God, but God does not need the church. That’s a humbling thought, but true. God is free to work through anyone. So, my sisters and brothers, let’s not make God too small. Let’s not think for a moment that God is only our God, and that good cannot be done outside our community, our religion, or our nation.

Let us never forget for a moment the truth embedded in the opening words of the 24th Psalm.

*The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,*

*the world, and those who live in it,*

*for the Lord has founded it on the seas,*

*and established it on the rivers.*

Everything belongs to God: the earth is God’s earth; all people are God’s people. There is nothing that God cannot do. There is no one God cannot use. Why, God may even choose to use us to further God’s own will! May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.