

## *“The many pathways to God”*

September 27, 2009

Text: *Isaiah 56:1-8, Mark 9:38-41*

### I.

In this reading from Mark’s gospel, the disciple, John, says to Jesus: *Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.*

Right away, we see that apparently some of the disciples are concerned about orthodoxy, which for them means some level of consistency about the claims being made about Jesus and the actions being practiced.

Concern about the consistency of a message being proclaimed or a practice being promoted is a common concern. Leadership in any institution or business expects some level of adherence to an established vision or way of operating.

Leadership sets the tone—in government, in business, in education, the church ... in any institution. Leadership seeks a level of consistency—consistency to the vision, the tradition, to the core tenets and beliefs. You don’t want just anybody out there promoting your business or government or church or whatever. You want someone with the skills and abilities to advance the message you want to convey.

Understandably, when the disciples see this person—not from their group—performing a healing function in Jesus’ name, they want to make sure it’s okay. Truth be told: this could have been a huge problem.

For example, the person could have been some form of scam artist. He could have gotten the message about Jesus wrong and been using Jesus’ name for personal gain.

### II.

In Acts 8, there’s the story of Simon Magus whom many thought to have miraculous powers. However, when Simon heard the preaching of the disciples, he became a believer. And, later, when he saw how the Spirit was given in the laying on of the Apostles’ hands, he offered them money to be able to have this power. Of course, he was severely rebuked.

However, what we see here is the challenge of having some form of guidelines, some consistency of message to the way Jesus and the faith that developed around him were presented.

*But he's not one of us*, one of the disciples implied—about this person, casting out demons in Jesus' name.

What's interesting is Jesus' openness here. Immediately, he says: ***Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.***

It's that last part that sticks with us, doesn't it? ***Whoever is not against us is for us.*** Certainly, it opens the door to a variety of ways of affirming Jesus, of presenting him and talking about him to others.

Moreover, Jesus suggests here that an exorcism in his name (a casting out of demons, or a healing) serves as a sort of *conversion ordinance*, a powerful act that cannot leave the performer himself unaffected.

Again, ***No one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me.***

### III.

In this passage, Jesus seems to understand, intuitively, that there are countless ways of sharing the faith. Perhaps the key element here is Jesus' faith and confidence that anyone sharing the faith in his name will themselves become converted. That's a real testimony.

In any event, ***Whoever is not against us is for us.***

One thing we've surely learned over the centuries and centuries of Christian history and tradition is that there are **many pathways to God**. Just because someone is not in our group and perhaps doesn't *think like* we do or *talk like* we do doesn't mean that their pathway to God is any lesser than ours. It's just different.

Always, one of the dangers in the Church and in the Christian faith is to be too exclusive in anything we do. Exclusive in membership, in who can take communion or be baptized or be married or buried or whatever it is.

All of the religions of the world have their pathway to God. And these pathways bear much in common. Clearly, there are distinctions, which shouldn't be trivialized; but there's also much in common.

### IV.

In **Islam**, for example, the cornerstone belief is in the ONENESS of God—a belief which, of course, we Christians also share, as does Judaism. Also, Islam has its own version of the 10 Commandments and much that overlaps with the teachings of the Bible.

**Buddhism**, emphasizes a sense of detachment from the desires of the world which we find reflected in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

This detachment is itself a process, or a path of enlightenment that leads to the exalted state of *nirvana*, somewhat comparable to what we call salvation. Buddhism, much like our Christian faith, also emphasizes equality and teaches the Golden Rule as one of its core tenets.

**Hinduism**, the oldest of all the world's major religions, also believes in the ONENESS of truth, and teaches that different sages call it by different names.

A vibrant thread of tolerance runs throughout Hindu teachings. The practice of Yoga and the notion of Karma are two of Hinduism's contributions to our modern vernacular.

A common goal of all these religions is *liberation*—to be free from the clutches of the world; free from too much desire, from sin and from ignorance. When we're truly free, we're at ONE with God and with one another.

## V.

Friends, the best of Jesus and the best of Christianity do not deny other pathways to God.

We all come to God in a very personal sense don't we? And our faith is always a blending of our tradition, our personal beliefs and story, our life experience, and our fears and hopes.

Faith is so very personal. And simply put, people have to be free—free to sort it out as the Spirit moves in our lives; and free, as well, to discern the teachings of the Scriptures.

This is an on-going adventure of the Spirit, which has no end. Sometimes it's helpful in all of this to ask ourselves, **Why am I Christian**, as opposed to something else? Think about it: why are you/ and why am I a Christian?

My answer to this question is very simple and straight forward. I'm Christian because this is the faith that God has given me. I was born into a Christian family in a largely Christian context. My parents and ancestors before me were Christian as well. In fact, as I've learned in recent years, some of my ancestors on both sides were pastors, Baptist and Methodist.

However, just because I happened to be born in Aurora, Illinois, into a Christian family and a Christian social/historical context, doesn't mean that my way or our way is the only way.

I could have been born in Sri Lanka (south of India) and been Buddhist; or in India and been Hindu; or in Indonesia and been Muslim. Or, I could have been born Jewish.

My niece is married to a Jewish man (I officiated at her wedding, some years ago, along with a Rabbi). And my son-in-law, the father of my new granddaughter, is half Jewish. His paternal grandparents were Jews who came here from Russia; his mother was a Swedish-born Christian.

## VI.

The best of Jesus and the best of Christianity do not disparage other religions and faith traditions. They don't advocate some simplistic, cookie-cutter Christian faith where we're all the same and where people have to pass some test on creed or dogma in order to be one of us.

In the *United Church of Christ*, to be *one of us* is to be open and inclusive of all people. There is no dogma or creed in the UCC. For us, freedom of conscience is simply too big.

To expect other persons to *be like us* doesn't take seriously their life-experience. And if we're called to love our neighbor as ourselves, shouldn't we be as accepting of another person's faith as we'd want them to be accepting of our faith?

To be a Christian—to be a person of love and compassion—don't we have to accept people where they are? That doesn't mean, of course, that we can't *be* Christian in their presence; of course we can. But it does suggest that our first goal upon meeting them should not be to change them.

Love, at its best, does not say to the other person: *You have to be like me and believe like me in order for me to accept you.*

## VII.

What this scripture potentially nudges us towards is a larger and more accepting and compassionate view of life. The best of Jesus and the best of Christianity invite us and challenge to be BIG people.

Big people aren't petty; they're not exclusive. They don't have to always be right and they don't have to have other people agree with them all the time to be okay.

BIG people value diversity and realize that diversity makes us better, bigger people. As people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we MUST appreciate the value of diversity along side the larger goal of unity.

Part of what's happening in our country in recent times is that, for many people in the heart land and in the Bible belt, the world has changed. Not only are our demographics changing, they've already changed. And countless thousands of people are anxious about things ... uneasy about all the change. They haven't evolved with the times.

To meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have to embrace the change with a BIG spirit—a spirit of openness. People don't have to be like us to be Americans or to be Christians. And they certainly don't have to think like us or believe like us.

One of the beautiful things about Miami is our rich diversity of ethnic groups and languages.

*There are many pathways*—many pathways to being an American, many pathways to being a Christian and many pathways to the ONE God who is Creator and Redeemer of all that is.

May the words of **Third Isaiah**, the prophet of the restoration, echo in our hearts and spirits:

*For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.  
And I will bring all people to my holy mountain.*

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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