

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost



30 September 2018

Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29

Psalm 19:7-14

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

From our Collect today:

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity:

Would you accept a cup of cold water from me?

Would you offer a cup of cold water to me?

I ask because I think this week's reading contains some of the more heart-breaking lines in Scripture:

“We tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

Let's just pause and think about that for a moment.

The disciples see someone who was trying to help another person who is suffering on behalf of Jesus.

And they stopped him.

Why?

“Because he was not following us.”

I know some still wonder about the veracity of the gospels but just as an aside, they say one of the ways historians believe these documents are real is because they include such damaging and embarrassing information.

Because no one would actually write down all the dumb stuff they did if it were not true - no one would make themselves look this bad over and over.

And yet, here we are again.

Including a noticeable shift in pronouns.

This other person is doing works of power in “*your* name,” Jesus - but “not following *us*.”

Apparently, it is not enough to be a follower of Jesus; you also have to be in the right clique, in the right circle.

Sounds a little bit like middle school.

But Jesus, being Jesus, doesn’t give the disciples the validation they seek.

Far from it.

Jesus corrects John and says, “Don’t stop him.”

Jesus knows they need as much help as they can get!

And not just in the “deeds of power” category - but with everything and anything, even the smallest gesture of kindness in Jesus’s name is helpful.

As the Message translation puts it, “Anyone, by just giving you a cup of water in my name, is a friend. God will notice.”

Scholars believe Mark is re-telling this scene from Jesus’s ministry in order to help a young Christian community deal with some of their internal conflicts.

We don’t know quite what the dividing lines were just that there were some big divisions within the “church” and everyone was taking sides and pointing fingers.

Sounds familiar.

After the events of these past weeks, we can’t help but wonder if anything has really changed.¹

¹ The Catholic Church is reeling from sexual misconduct; the Episcopal Church is fighting about same-sex marriage; the Judge Kavanaugh hearings are happening; the president is pointing fingers; a board member from GMC is claiming people are not worthy because they don’t really live in Georgetown; atheists want to remove a WW1 memorial cross. Sigh.

And so Mark invites this conflicted community into Jesus's story in order to reframe how they think about their commitments, their identity and ultimately, themselves.

It seems as if they - and we - can't escape the death-grip of drawing circles around people... those who are in and those who are out.

Those we believe. And those we don't.

Those who are like us. And those who are not.

It doesn't take long to realize anyone can easily say, "And we tried to stop him because he's not like us."

But that isn't Jesus's way.

Jesus tells us then, and now, that it is possible for God to be at work in and through someone who isn't one of us.

And so it begs the question...

Can we open ourselves?

Can we open our circles?

Can we open our church, and our homes, and our communities, for those who disagree with us?

Can we try to stop trying to convince someone else why they are wrong - or, worse, condemning them because they believe something differently than we do - and try to understand what experiences have shaped those views?

Can we imagine that, given the enormity of the challenges in front of us, there may be good ideas coming from people who hold a different perspective than we do?

Can we accept a cup of cold water from someone who is not like us?

William Barclay, in his commentary on this passage from Mark's gospel says, "Intolerance is a sign of arrogance and ignorance, for it is a sign that one believes there is truth only in the truth one sees."²

I am not advocating surrendering your convictions - far from it.

But what if we tried what some call "empathetic imagination" - that is, to try to know, understand, and even respect those with whom we disagree.

Or, as my daughter Annie often asks: "How much does it cost you to be nice?"

There are so few spaces in our world right now that offers room for genuine conversation.

There are so few places where each person takes on the responsibility to be able to hear the beliefs of the other.

This is not easy stuff.

And Jesus is pretty harsh.

If anything gets in the way of you behaving in a tolerant and loving manner, then get rid of it.

Full stop.

And James, the brother of Jesus, tells us what we do, and how we do it, matters just as much as what we say or what we believe.

But maybe, just maybe, if you get rid of that millstone you will feel lighter and more open.

If you can open your hand or open your heart, you might just open your circle.

And there is no better place to practice that opening up, than right here.

Why?

² Barclay, William: The Gospel of Mark, p. 226

Because I believe God is up to something very big, very radical, and very important - and I believe that it happens in the local church.

Not at Lambeth Palace - the seat of the Anglican Communion.

Not at 815 - the site of our Episcopal national headquarters.

Not at the National Cathedral where Episcopalians host the country in celebration and mourning.

But right here at the corner of 31st and O in the heart of Georgetown.

And in all of the local churches in the world.

We are the people of God.

And we need all the help we can get.

Today we have the honor of baptizing two special babies into our Christian family.

Not just Christ Church, Not just the Episcopal Church, but the entire Christian family.

We will promise, with God's help, to resist evil, to turn to Jesus, to show others the love of God by seeking and serving Christ in ALL PEOPLE as we respect the dignity of EVERY human being.

As I said, this is not easy stuff.

And I don't know about you, but I fail at one or all of those almost every single day.

But God offers me mercy.

God offers me grace.

God knows my failings are not my true self.

God knows my fists are holding tight to something I don't need.

And so I say I'm sorry.

And God pries open my fingers just a little.

And I try again.

To be better today than I was yesterday.

And I think I am better, when I am a part of this church community.

When I am in relationship with you, and by extension Georgetown, and Washington, this nation, and the world.

You open my hands and you open my heart and you open my circle.

It starts right here.

It starts with Jesus as my savior and this beautiful, loving church.

So that I might be a better Christian today and tomorrow and the day after that.

The crux of every sermon is really, "so what."

Yes, Mark wrote this gospel after hearing first hand from Peter about Jesus.

Yes, Mark gives us a vivid recollection as if it was happening before his very eyes.

And yes, Mark tells us about the challenges facing a struggling Christian community wondering where to go while facing persecution from the outside over here and internal theological division over here.

So what?!

Well... what if we could write a different ending?

In his poem "Outwitted," Edwin Markham writes:

"He drew a circle that shut me out - Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But Love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle that took him in.”

What if we could change Mark’s narrative for us?

What if, in light of Jesus telling his first-century followers to be open to others they may not like ... those not in their circle... what if we, his 21st-century disciples, wrote a different ending?

“We saw some people, Lord, that we don’t like.

They do not follow us.

In fact, we really disagree with them.

But they love you, too.

And they gave us a cup of cold water.”

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity.³

³ Resources: David Lose, William Barclay, and Andy Stanley.