

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
September 27, 2015

We Belong to Christ

Mark 9:38-41

If you followed the coverage of the Pope's trip this past week, you know that his presence here on American soil was a unifying event for Catholics, especially in the cities he visited. Part of the purpose of his trip was to create greater cohesion among Catholics in the United States. But the unity that Pope Francis preaches, and for which he prays, extends beyond just those who identify themselves as Catholic. Last May, he delivered a video message to a Christian unity celebration in Phoenix, Arizona, which included both evangelicals and Catholics. In that message, the Pope maintained that though Christians see themselves as divided into different churches and denominations, the devil actually sees that they are one in their faith in Jesus.

Pope Francis said, "Division is the work of the 'Father of Lies,' 'the Father of Discord,' who does everything possible to keep us divided." He went on to say that the devil "knows that Christians are disciples of Christ, that they are one, that they are brothers! He doesn't care if they are Evangelicals or Orthodox, Lutherans, Catholics or Apostolic . . . he doesn't care! They are Christians."¹

It's interesting how the Pope wants us to see the Christian community from the devil's vantage point, rather than just our own perspective. From our angle, we see continued disagreement between Catholics and Protestants, fights within denominations, conflicts between theological conservatives and theological liberals, separation among Christians of different races and ethnicities, gaps between Christians in developed nations and Christians in the third World. But the devil, our common enemy, seems to have a clearer sense of the spiritual warfare that's taking place, and treats us as a united front, even though we don't act like it.

We certainly don't look very united in this morning's Scripture passage from Mark. John comes to Jesus anticipating a pat on the back because he and the other disciples have shut down someone's unauthorized exorcism ministry. An unidentified man has been driving out demons using the name of Jesus. According to the disciples, he's unaccredited for this kind of work. He doesn't have the proper credentials to be going around liberating people from Satan's power.

Now granted, we don't know much about this man who was driving out demons in Jesus' name. We don't know what his motives were. We don't know if he was just attracted to this power that Jesus exercises, or if he was a wannabe disciple. But none of this seems to be the focus of Jesus' concern. Rather, Jesus' main issue has to do with this sense of competitiveness that has taken root in his disciples. In the passage right before today's text, Jesus chastises them for their internal debates about status and greatness. Instead of asking themselves, "What kind of attitude will keep us united on the front lines of this kingdom mission?" the disciples are asking, "Which one of us will get the 'most likely to succeed' award?"

Maybe they've started to close the circle of discipleship too tightly. You can sort of hear it in John's assessment of the man who was driving out demons. "He wasn't one of us." "Us" can be a positive word that indicates cohesion and a sense of common purpose. But "us" can also be a dangerous word that indicates exclusion and rivalry. Do Jesus' disciples think they've cornered the market on his saving power? Do they think they have a monopoly on the work of the kingdom? Do they think they're the only ones qualified to bear the name of Jesus into the world? When John says this man wasn't one of us, has he forgotten that the call to discipleship isn't, "Follow us." It's "Follow Jesus."

Writer Oscar Wilde once told a fictional tale about how the devil was crossing the Libyan desert and came upon a small number of demons who were tormenting a holy hermit. The sainted man easily shook off their evil suggestions. After watching his lieutenants fail to sway the hermit, the devil stepped forward to give them a lesson.

"What you do is too crude," said the devil. "Permit me for one moment." He then whispered to the holy man, "Your brother has just been made Bishop of Alexandria." Suddenly, a look of malignant envy clouded the once-serene face of the hermit. The devil then turned to his imps and said, "That is the sort of thing which I should recommend."²

Envy and rivalry are constant threats to the work and witness of Jesus followers. So in today's text, he calls out his disciples for their competitiveness and their insider versus outsider mentality. They've become so concerned with determining who is and who isn't a card-carrying member of their group that they can't recognize the authentic work of God when it's happening through someone beyond their own circle. As for this man who was working wonders in Jesus' name, the disciples are told to leave him alone. Let him do what he's doing. "Someone who is doing a deed of saving power in my name one minute isn't going to turn around and bad-mouth me the next," says Jesus. Notice how our Lord takes a broader, more expansive view of the how the kingdom is happening. "Whoever is not against us is for us" he says (v. 40).

Sometimes we need Jesus to remind us of how his battle against Satan and the ongoing presence of evil requires all the resources possible. Part of what this means is that all of us who call on the name of the Lord Jesus need to spend more time cooperating with one another and less time competing with one another. This applies not only within the life of a congregation but among and between congregations as well. It's hard to bring different groups of Christians together for collective worship, work, and witness. We get so settled and comfortable within our own congregational or denominational atmosphere that we lose our vision of Christ's people united in the life and work of the kingdom.

Last week I took Bethany to an appointment. When I walked into the waiting area, there sat Chris Ogne, pastor of Lutheran Church of Our Savior, the congregation right next door to us. He and I chatted for a few minutes, catching up on things going on within our lives and our families. In one respect, it was an encouraging encounter, an opportunity to renew our fellowship in Christ. But I also left the conversation with a little sense of guilt because he and I don't really see one another and talk to one another that often. I mean here we are, with churches separated by a space as small as the width of Downs Drive, and yet we aren't nearly as engaged with one another as we could be. True, we've partnered in previous years for the Easter sunrise service and the NETS ministry. But there's probably so much more that we could do cooperatively as a sign of our unity in Christ and our common mission, especially since our places of worship sit right beside one another. And don't forget Shiloh United Methodist Church, just across the way on the other side of our church. Last Sunday, they celebrated their 180th anniversary. If you're like me, when trying to tell someone where our church is located, it usually helps to tell them that on

Highway 210 there are three churches in a row, and we're the one in the middle. It's interesting how often folks do remember the spot because there's a string of congregations. The Methodists, Baptists, and Lutherans are right next door to each other, yet also so separated as well.

Sometimes it can be tempting to view other neighboring churches as competitors, vying for members within the local community. This is an even greater danger in a time when so many congregations are declining in membership and participation. In that kind of atmosphere, churches can feel an even greater pressure to compare themselves with one another. What size is their congregation? Is their budget larger or smaller than ours? How many programs and activities do they have for children and youth? Do they have any plans for building expansion? How does our website look compared to theirs? You see how the competitiveness and the striving for status that pervades so much of our culture can work its way into the hearts and minds of believers and shape the way that we view other congregations of Christians.

One pastor tells the story of how a member of his congregation's staff invited a gentleman to their church. His initial response was, "I like competition with my sports, but not with church." The staff member soon learned that he wasn't a Christian, but had started attending a church in order to explore the role of faith in his life. Unfortunately, that church soon split, leading to a new church across town. He said that from that point on, a sense of competition seethed through so much of the originating church's life and message. So the gentleman left there and landed at a new congregation that seemed to show some promise. But within weeks, he picked up on the same mood again. Being "better" than other churches seemed to be the congregation's mission. He said the story line was simple: "No other church in town is like us, as good as us, is doing what we're doing, or loves Jesus like we do. Aren't you glad you're here, and not there?" So he stopped going to church.³

What a contrast to a card I received in the mail recently. It was from Brian Sandifer, the pastor, and the entire Potomac Heights Baptist Church family. The card read simply: "Kevin, we will be praying for you and your church this Sunday, September 13. May the Lord use you to reach your neighbors with the gospel." It's also important that you know this isn't the first such card we've received from our brothers and sisters in Christ just down the road. There have been Sundays earlier this year when their church was lifting up our church to the Lord.

The struggle against the plans of the devil, against the power of sin, and against injustice and unrighteousness, requires that brothers and sisters in Christ pray for one another, across congregational and denominational lines. We only undermine the cause of the kingdom if we look at others who are faithfully ministering in the name of Jesus, and say, "Yeah, that's good, but they're not one of us." Jesus' response to his own disciples' narrow vision shows that "us" is often bigger and more inclusive than we think it is.

At the end of today's text, Jesus says to his competitive disciples, "Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose their reward" (v. 41). So whether they, or we, are on the giving or the receiving end of deeds done in the name of Christ, we need to remember that we belong to him; He doesn't belong to us. He, and his name, aren't here for us to use, as our property or tool, in an attempt to look more impressive or successful than other groups of his followers. The fact is, you encounter and engage with sincerely devoted followers of Jesus each day, at work, at school, in your neighborhoods, in your family, and so on. Our call and our mission is to live and serve, as much as possible, in cooperation and partnership with all those who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and who bear his name in witness to the world.

¹ Cindy Wooden, "The Devil Knows Christians Are One, Says Pope Francis." Catholic Herald website. May 25, 2015. Accessed September 23, 2015 <<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/05/25/the-devil-knows-christians-are-one-says-pope-francis/>>.

² As told by James Emery White, "The Largest and fastest-growing." Church and Culture website. October 17, 2008. Accessed September 26, 2015 <<http://www.churchandculture.org/Blog.asp?ID=75>>.

³ James Emery White, "Competition with Other Churches." A blog at crosswalk.com. June 2, 2011. Accessed September 24, 2015 <<http://www.crosswalk.com/blogs/dr-james-emery-white/competition-with-other-churches.html>>.