

Against or For?

November 25, 2012

Mark 9.38-41

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

I was talking the other day to a woman who bought a franchise business. For the sake of uniformity, franchises have to abide by the guidelines established by the parent company. Franchise owners have to become indoctrinated in the ways of the company and pay considerable sums of money for the right of brand recognition. The end result is consistency. I can go into a McDonalds anywhere in the world and know I can see the golden arches. I can go most major cities and see strip malls that look exactly like the ones down the street. When I patronize a franchised business I generally know the menu, the décor, and the store layout before I ever walk through the door. In other words a franchise means that I generally know what to expect and that certain standards will be followed.

The same cannot be said for churches. They are not interchangeable. We don't all do the same things. We don't believe the same things. We don't read the Bible the same way. We don't worship the same way. The only thing we have in common is Jesus – and we don't all believe the same things about him. This is true today and it was true in the first century church. There never was one single way of being Christian. Jesus didn't train his disciples to manage franchises – he turned them loose with nothing more than the values Jesus espoused – values that included love of neighbor, mercy for the sick and destitute, and inclusion for the outcasts.

And yet – to hear Christians bicker – you'd think there was a franchise manual that had a chapter on every aspect of the church:

- Section 1-A – How to set the communion table.
- Section 1-B – Here is the brand of juice to use.
- Section 1-C – The water temperature in the baptistery must be 92 degrees.
- Section 2 - Uniforms and Grooming
- Section 3 – Membership and Dues
- Section 4 – The officially sanctioned version of the Lord's Prayer
- Section 5 – Appropriate Music
- Section 6 – Appropriate Behavior

Jesus wrote no such manual – he simply said, “Follow me.” He didn't come to establish an institution he came to establish the Kingdom of God. And apparently there is more than one way to work toward this kingdom.

Formal church, informal church

With instruments, without instruments

Clergy led, lay led

Large church, small church

Liberal church, conservative church

Inclusive church, exclusive church

Churches that save folks from hell, churches that think poverty is hell

Churches with women leaders – Churches that don't allow women in any form of leadership

Churches that interpret scripture as literally and factually true – and those that don't

Churches that punish dissent with excommunication – and churches that welcome dissenters

Churches that think the world is going to end soon – Churches that we need to conserve for the future

Don't tell me we are all the same – because we are not. And while I think one way is preferable over another I don't have the right to question the motivations of those who differ from me, because as different as we are, we are all trying to do ministry in Jesus' name.

If you spend any time at all looking at Christian history you can trace multiple and wildly divergent expressions of the Christian faith that sometimes intersect and then split again. Some churches adapted and changed as modernity introduced new challenges – others dug in their heels and tried their best to remain uncontaminated by the world, and still others followed the teachings of the official state religion.

In the 1700's in American religious history the First Great Awakening stirred religious revival. Instead of dense theological sermons preachers like Jonathan Edwards engaged listeners at the level of their hearts – they proclaimed that the Holy Spirit trumped the institutional church and this new fire laid the groundwork for the American Revolution.

An unanticipated result was that women felt the anointing of the Holy Spirit and began preaching and leading revivals. Seen as heretics by the church, these women and men told people they did not have to be slaves to the institutional and clergy dominated church – they could think for themselves – the Spirit would guide them.

So here is a woman preaching in the 1700's, leading folks to Christ, authorized by the Holy Spirit – and another group of Christians condemning her because the Bible says women can't do that. So who is right?

In our scripture reading for today, John, one of Jesus' disciples announces to Jesus that there is a guy who is exorcising demons in Jesus' name but, John says, "he does not follow us." John is put out that this guy is doing ministry in Jesus' name without being officially authorized by Jesus or the disciples. Instead of celebrating the fact that this man was liberating people from demons, John is upset that he isn't "one of us!" He fully expected Jesus to affirm his righteous indignation and condemn the man.

But Jesus does just the opposite – he doesn't condemn the man – he says instead, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

If there is wisdom to be gleaned it is to remember that we are called to be ministers of the gospel, not compliance officers for a franchise. What is most important is that the gospel is advanced.

We are fortunate to be part of a church that believes diversity enlarges our understanding of God.
Here we are encouraged to grow and ask questions rather than tow the party line.
Here there are no insiders or outsiders
Here you are not forced to conform to one particular way but you are encouraged to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Here there is differentness, but one Christ.
Here we understand faith is a journey not a destination.
Here we know we do not hold the patent on the truth but we hold the truth sacred.
We are Christians, but not the only Christians.

Instead of getting distracted by what others are doing, may we keep our focus on what God calls us to do – to be agents of God’s reconciling love in a broken world. Amen.