

"Embracing Diversity with Distinction"  
Mark 9:38-50

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At an ecumenical gathering of religious leaders, someone shouted: "The building is on fire!" The Methodists gathered in the corner and prayed. The Baptists yelled, "Where's the water?" The Quakers quietly praised God for the blessing fire brings. The Lutherans posted a notice on the door declaring fire to be evil while the Catholics took pledges to cover the expenses of the fire. The Christian Scientists agreed among themselves there was really no fire at all while the Pentecostals praised God and shouted, "Holy Smoke!" The Presbyterians appointed a committee to look into the matter and make a written report at the next session and the Episcopalians formed a procession and marched out of the building in decency and order, of course.

On this first Sunday of October, Christians around the world will bow in elaborate cathedrals or open air meetings to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. We call it Worldwide Communion Sunday. It is an invitation for people of all classes and colors, backgrounds and beliefs, traditions and testimonies to join hands and hearts in love and loyalty to Jesus Christ. Welcome to the table of diversity.

As the disciples went about doing good they ran into other people doing good as well. "Teacher," said John, "We saw this man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." Jesus gave this response, "Do not stop him. Whoever is not against us is for us. Anyone who gives a cup of water in my name will receive his reward." With words like "whosoever" and "anyone", Jesus opens the doors of cooperation wide for the good of hurting humanity. I don't know about you, but I am deeply grateful he did.

We live in an era of history when people love to find secure corners, demonize the opposition, and spend their time casting barbs back and forth at those with whom they disagree. Sometimes we do it in a light-hearted manner with sports. Well, not always so light-hearted. I have been here a week and already a dozen people have asked me, "When you were in Kentucky did you bleed red or blue? Were you a Cardinal fan or a Wildcat fan? Now that you are in

Tennessee are going to support Vanderbilt or U.T.?" Inquiring fans want to know early in the game where your loyalties lie. When we get to church we sometimes get mean-spirited about it. "Are you conservative or liberal. Are you a member of the good news or gay rights? Are you part of the confessing movement or the reconciling movement?" At General Conference we like to name people, "Are you a connectionalist or a localist?" It took me two weeks to figure out what either one was.

While Jesus says over and over, "Whoever is not against us is for us." We want to say, "Whoever is not for us is against us." John Wesley in his sermon on the "catholic spirit" appealed for a whole different kind of attitude than that which seems to be prevailing in our day. Listen to some of his words. Though we cannot all think alike, may we not all love alike? May we not be of one heart though we will never be all of one opinion? I believe infants ought to be baptized by dipping or sprinkling and if you are persuaded otherwise then follow your persuasion. I believe in the Episcopal form of church government wrote Mr. Wesley, but if you think independent is better then act accordingly. If your heart is with my heart in love and loyalty to Jesus Christ, then take my hand. Love me patiently, pray for me continually, and join me in good works. That's what I mean by taking my hand, explained Mr. Wesley in a sermon much longer than the one I am preaching this morning.

Before I joined a church, I would ask to know "Is everyone welcome at the table?" Before I joined a church I want to know "Are women full partners in ministry." Before I joined a church I'd ask the question, "Are children valued as whole persons in this community?" Before I joined a church I'd want to know "Are other religions respected and are baptisms of other denominations accepted?" Before I joined a church I would want to know "Is there a spirit of exclusion or inclusion, of competition or cooperation, of respect or ridicule, of diversity or division?" I'd want to know before I joined a church.

Welcome to the table of diversity. Let me hasten to say, welcome to the table of distinction. Let us never forget at whose table be bow today. You see if this were an ordinary meal you could get more food at a back yard barbecue, more excitement at a football game, and maybe even more fellowship at the neighborhood bar. But we come to participate in the Body and Blood of Christ. We come to affirm the Cross, to claim redemption, to become one in Christ who has the power to make us one with one another. You see Christ does not become fragmented in us rather we become unified in Him. We

don't reduce Christ to who we are; he raises us to what He is. Or as the author of Colossians said in 1:17 "In Him all things hold together." Or all things cohere. In Christ we are held together.

So let me help us understand what tolerance is in our day. It's not laziness. It's an interesting period of history when you in the pew are challenged as much as those of us who stand in the pulpit to understand your beliefs and articulate them greatly. It's an exciting time to be alive. You see tolerance is not believing what you want, doing what you wish, acting as you will for we are all headed to the same place anyway and everybody who is sincere is okay, that's laziness. That's not belief. Tolerance is being so certain of the power of Christ that you feel no threat from those who think otherwise. Tolerance is being so free of selfish desires that you can sacrifice an arm and a leg, even an eye if you have to for the good of the whole, says the scripture, so not one little one should perish. Wesley put it this way, "Don't call yourself of the catholic spirit because you have muddy understanding and cannot make up your mind. Be as fixed as the sun concerning Christian devotion, not halting between opinions endeavoring to blend everything into one." Tolerance is not indifference. It is openness and there is a difference.

Maybe you have seen the e-mail floating around the last year or so about "How many church members does it take to change a light bulb?" They asked a Baptist how many members it took and they said "Who said anything about change?" The Catholics were asked and they said, "None, we use candles." The TV Evangelists said "One, but for the light to continue your way, send in your donation today." The Methodists were asked how many members it took and this resolution barely passed at General Conference. We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that a light bulb works for you, then that's fine. You are invited to write a poem about it, or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship with your light bulb and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday Service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three way, long life and tinted----all of which are equally valid paths of luminescence. Yuck!

In the midst of all of this conversation about whose in and whose out, Jesus draws that saying which goes, "You're the salt of the earth. But if the salt has lost its saltiness then where with all shall the earth be salted?" You know I understood that phrase "worth your salt" long before I knew how to read the Bible. My daddy use to talk

about it on the farm. Salt was a precious commodity of the ancient world. It was used to purify the sacrifices in worship. It was used to seal covenants between two individuals or for that matter between two nations. There is "salt between us", we understand one another.

It was certainly used to preserve the food supply to keep the meat from rotting. Have you ever smelled rotted meat? "That's what it's like without salt", said Jesus. You see salt is neither sensational nor spectacular, but its special. It's that kind of condiment that you just expect to be on your table or least in a package you can pick up and take if home in your carry out bag. Salt, you expect it to be there. Doesn't make a lot of noise, but you notice it when it's not there. "You", said Jesus, "are the salt of the earth." And what kind of fix will we be if the salt has lost its saltiness? Robert Bellah, a sociologist out in California says, "Never underestimate the significance of a small group of people who have a vision for a just and gentle world." Then he goes on to say, "The quality of culture may be changed when 2% of its people have a new vision."

Welcome to the table, the Lord wants to meet you here so that when you go to work tomorrow or relate to your family today you might flavor the thing in a powerful, positive sort of way. One bread, one Body, one Lord of all. One cup of blessing which we bless. And we, though many, throughout the world, we are one Body in this one Lord. Let it be so Lord. Let it be.

Amen.