

SAY IT AND MEAN IT  
Mark 9:38-50; Luke 10:25-37  
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Once again we have come to worship God and share in celebrating Holy Communion. And symbolically we join Christians all around the world in this celebration on this particular day. Once again we've come to express our love for God. And once again Jesus is here reminding us that if we want to say, "I love you, God", and mean it, we must also say, "I love you, neighbor," and mean it.

I would confess that at times I have not been very turned on by the ecumenical movement. I would confess that I am more impressed by ecumenism in service than in corporate worship. But I remember being radicalized by an experience on our first trip to the Holy Land. In our tour of the city of Jerusalem, we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which is the principle Christian sanctuary in the Holy City. For millions of Christians it represents the spot where Jesus was crucified and buried. Three centuries after the event, the first church was built over this spot by the emperor Constantine. And in the 18 centuries ever since, the church has been destroyed, burned, shaken by earthquake, but always rebuilt by a Christian group. There are parts of this church that are claimed by the Greek Orthodox Church, the Coptic Church, the Armenian Church, the Roman Catholic Church. And it is visited by millions of Christians every year.

As you enter this historic shrine, you will be puzzled and embarrassed to have your guide point out that just at the left as you entered you passed a cushioned recess where the Moslem doorkeepers serve as security guards. The post of custodian of the church is hereditary in a Jerusalem Moslem family which keeps the keys because of the fighting and disagreements among the various Christian groups.

One tour group entered into the darkened Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the traditional site of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and each tourist was given a little candle. As they looked around the church by candlelight, they noted that there were plenty of light fixtures, but none of them turned on. So they asked their guide, who patiently explained to them that the Christian groups who used the church fight among themselves about who should pay the light bills. And consequently, the Moslems had to shut the power off in order to stop the fighting.

Now this is the Middle East that we're talking about. And where in the world is there a more urgent need for a witness of unity and understanding? Yes, you and I are called to be signs of unity rather than signs of division. We ought to say it and mean it.

The story of told of a man who came down out of the hills of North Carolina all dressed up and with his Bible under his arm. A friend saw him and said, "Alias, what does this mean, where are you going?" and Alias answered, "I've been hearing there's lots of free running liquor and lots of gambling and some pretty wild partying in that town and I am to go down there and find out for myself firsthand." The friend thought about that for a moment and then said, "But Alias, why are you carrying your Bible under your arm?" To which Alias replied, "Well, if it's as good as they say it is, I might stay over Sunday."

Many of us have this problem. We stay over Sunday after Sunday to hear the word of God, but in between we tend to cast it aside.

In today's lesson from Mark's gospel, the disciples complain about a man who is doing good words in Jesus' name and the disciples report, "We tried to stop him because he's not one of our company, he's not one of us." And Jesus answers, "Any one who gives you a drink of water because you belong to Christ will not, I assure you, go without his or her reward."

Could it be that the disciples hadn't been paying attention when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan? How well have you remembered the details of that gospel episode. Picture the scene: Jerusalem 2,500 feet above sea level, Jericho 1,200 feet below sea level. The 15 mile winding road in between affords many hideaways for highway robbers, hijackers, terrorists. While traveling that hazardous road, a Jewish man is attacked, robbed, badly beaten, thrown into a ditch and left to die. Two persons come along, both are religious leaders in the injured man's own religious community. One is a priest, the other is a Levite. In our terms, we could say one is a pastor and the other a lay leader. Both profess to love God and to love neighbor and both pass by their brother in need. It is possible that the priest and Levite, or the pastor and the lay leader, had their Bibles tucked under their arms as they walked past the injured man. But they failed to translate what was in the Bible into real life action.

Then a Samaritan comes along, a member of a pathetic little group of poor people who are more or less ostracized from mainstream society. In that time and place, the Samaritan was a person who would have been least expected to stop and help a wounded Jew, he was not of their company. And yet it is the Samaritan who stops. It's the Samaritan who gets personally involved. And it's the Samaritan who takes all the time necessary to see that the injured person is properly cared for.

Anyone who's hurting, even a person you would be least expected to care about, is our neighbor. "Which of the three - priest, Levite or Samaritan - was neighbor to the wounded Jew?" Jesus asks. And we all know our answer to that question.

On this World Communion Sunday, if we are serious about loving God with our whole heart and soul and mind, we'll demonstrate our sincerity by being a caring, loving person toward our neighbor.

You know, there's renewed emphasis in our time on meditation and prayer and worship and spiritual practices and devotional life and many other experiences that are intended to enrich our religious sense. And those experiences deserve our attention. But important as these things are, we need to hear Jesus saying over and over again that the ultimately important thing is whether or not you are a caring person - whether or not I am a caring person.

During the furious World War II bombings of London, the air raid shelters filled with men and women and children seeking below ground sanctuary. Subways, tunnels, basements of sturdy buildings were crammed with huddled masses of human beings. The shelters were supervised by civilian air raid wardens; Air Raid Precautions Warden was the official title. One

of the wardens was an actor named Stanley Lopeno, father of the famous actress Ida Lopeno. In a letter to his wife, who was then living in America with their daughter Ida, Stanley Lopeno wrote, "They don't laugh at the wardens anymore; they bless us and look upon us as their great friends in need. During the night, I visit the sleeping people in shelters. I never speak, only stand nearby, but they all say they feel my presence even in the darkness and it gives them confidence. I never wake them, just stand in the dim light of a night light. If one wants to talk, one whispers. One girl, a typist in the city, was awake in an overcrowded shelter. 140 people huddled in heaps on the floor. She looked up and whispered, 'Hold my hand, sir, just for a minute.' I said, 'Of course.' After awhile she pressed it to her face and said, 'I feel better now. I haven't seen my man in three months and I'm going to have a baby. I just wanted to feel someone's hand on my face.'

It's not the bombs that upset you, it's the loveableness of the people, their hearts and souls laid bare and one laid bare so sweet to see. Neighbors, who have never exchanged a word, huddled together for warmth and closeness. I saw a palefaced boy of 18 with an old lady's head pillowed in his lap. He was stroking her hair. 'Your mom?' I said, 'No, sir,' he replied, 'I don't know her.'"

Jesus reminds us today that his definition excludes no one. As disciples of Christ, we cannot say of any other human being that he or she is not of our company. As disciples of Christ, we cannot wait for times of tragedy and war to reach out to our neighbor with warmth and genuine caring love. In good times and in bad times both, if we way to say, "I love you, God," and mean it, we must also say "I love you neighbor," and mean it. May this be what we say and mean as we gather around this table that extends all around the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.