

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson  
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant  
27<sup>th</sup> September 2009  
Pentecost XVII  
Mark 9:38-50

John, son of Zebedee, whines, "Teacher, somebody's on our turf! Someone's casting out demons in your name, but he's not one of us!"

And Jesus rebukes:

*"Do not stop him..."*

John complains that this exorcist isn't part of the club.

Jesus says there is no club.

John's territory is being infringed upon by some interloper –

Jesus says there are no boundaries to the kingdom of God.

The kingdom, you see, is wide open.

Jesus, the very incarnation of God's power and presence, refused to live by the divisions and barriers of his time. He challenged the practice of confining God's redemptive and transforming action to one's own race, one's own religious institution, one's own political party.

When the disciples wanted exclusive claim to God's reign, he *challenged* them to see God's presence and power manifested in those who were not members of their group – the woman at the well, the tax collector, the outcast and the leper.

All sorts of people take pride in belonging to an exclusive club, living in an exclusive neighborhood, shopping at exclusive stores. "I'm in and you're not. I'm qualified and you're not. I'm *better* than you!"

Early Christianity was troubled by squabbles – *serious* squabbles – over who was "in" and who was "out." St. Peter wanted to baptize Gentiles; St. James wanted the followers of Jesus to be Jewish.

The problem I have is when some really weird cult member says that what he does he does in the name of Christ.

At some point, nearly every Christian tradition tries to occupy a spiritual high ground, as the genuine descendants of Jesus Christ – unlike, of course, all those other *poseurs* and wannabes. I remember seeing a sign advertising "The Full Gospel Church" – does that imply that we are somehow "The Partially Deficient Gospel Church?"

I suggest to you that doing something "in the name of Jesus" is not always kingdom behavior.

The Crusades.  
The Inquisition.  
Christianist jihadists against Muslims.

Did you know that there are churches where teenagers have been encouraged to play the violent video games "Halo" and "Left Behind"? ("Halo" - Colorado Community Church, Denver - NY Times, 10/07/07; "Left Behind" - Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church, Temecula, CA - Business Wire, 04/10/09)

Halo's message and the Left Behind message are not only violent, but apocalyptic: Halo encourages the destruction of the earth to hurry up Armageddon so believers can go heaven. The Left Behind series applauds the rapturing up of the Christians and the destruction of all those non-believers who obviously didn't choose correctly. Is it any wonder that many Christians, and non-Christians, find this thinking dangerous and frightening? Is it any wonder that many of us find the hypocrisy of some Christians to be far too influential in our social and religious and political life?

But what kind of Christ are these churches selling, once they snare the teen-agers into coming to church? It's certainly not the Christ who is the Prince of Peace, The Suffering Servant, the Lamb of God, The Compassionate One, The Healer, The One who Forgives, the Lover, the One who tells us to love our enemies and to do good to those who persecute us. The image of a Militant Christ is not found in the Gospels. Nor is it good theology to talk about hurrying along Armageddon, as if we had control over any End Times.

I can understand why the disciples were worried.

And we've certainly seen our share of Christianism, or Dominionism, in American politics - a constant barrage of Bible-quoting, often out of context and often just plain *wrong*, in arguments for *and against* abortion, same-gender marriage, the collapse of Wall Street, assisted suicide, racial discrimination, poverty, the war in Iraq, our position on Israel-Palestine, and health care reform.

"In the name of Christ" is a very scary term - I suggest that it be used very, very carefully.

I suggest that when something is done in the so-called name of Christ it must be held up against the overarching messages of our Lord.

1. Does it promote peace?
2. Does it promote justice?
3. Does it promote reconciliation?
4. Does it promote love?
5. Does it bring the kingdom of God closer to all humankind?

If the answer to all five of these questions is “yes,” then I think we are on safe ground. But if one of the answers is a shaky yes or a near-no or an outright no, then – perhaps we’d better question the real motive of the doer.

No Christian denomination owns the name of Christ. No Christian denomination owns the essence of Christ. No Christian denomination owns kingdom behavior.

But when we serve the poor in the name of Christ so that I’ll look good, or because it makes me *feel* good, then we’re on shaky ground.

Any time we do justice and love mercy in the name of Christ with the hope of being elected to public office, we’re on shaky ground.

And any time we cause hurt or violence or fear – we’re on shaky ground.

Every once in a while the disciples came up with another wacky idea that they were special. Well, they *were* special in the sense that they were called by Jesus – and they responded. Not all of us would be prepared to abandon our families and our livelihoods.

But they also tended toward a belief that Jesus needed to be surrounded by some sort of exclusive club. A gated community. A world with boundaries, borders, defined by who is in and who is out. The early church had plenty of this as well – I’ve already mentioned the fear some in Jerusalem had that letting “those people” – the Gentiles – in to The Way would somehow contaminate the growing Christ-following movement. Fortunately, St. Paul had his way – and The Way began to grow well beyond its origins as a Jewish sect. “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek,” he said.

The borders were breached by love.

The Way of Christ is a way of reaching out to those who are excluded. It is a way of practicing kingdom behavior, where every act of goodness, every act of kindness, every act which promotes peace and justice and mercy can be done “in the name of Christ.” It is a way of honoring God and it is a way of honoring the God-essence in one another.

It is, I believe, a way to become more Christ-like.

And it is, I believe, a way of life that *gives* life. And hope. And light. And love.

*Amen.*