

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 30, 2018

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## “Whoever Is Not Against Us Is for Us”

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Scripture: Mark 9:38-50; 19 Pentecost B (Proper 21B RCL)

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Imagine picking up the Minneapolis Star Tribune one morning and reading the headline:

Local Shriners Bash Rotary Club for Aiding Burn Victims!

President Sam Samuelson says: “Sure, a lot of people are getting helped, but we’ve been serving burn victims for years, and they haven’t. Those other guys aren’t Shriners. They ought to stop helping the people we are trying to help. Next thing you know they will be trying to drive around in little go-carts in parades too!”

Or how about this? You pick up a copy of the Ancient Jerusalem Times one morning, and the headline reads:

Apostles Campaign for Spiritual Franchise;  
Want to Halt Unauthorized Ministry!

Spokesman John, the brother of James, says: “Jesus’ influence is so great that people everywhere are trying to heal others in his name. This has got to stop! These unauthorized exorcists aren’t part of our group. We intend to file suit for copyright infringement immediately!”

Okay, that’s a little silly. But how about this?

*Somewhere in the very rural southern United States, a small Episcopal Church had become a temporary home for dozens of Hispanic itinerant workers laboring nearby in the fields. The Episcopalians gladly welcomed the community and provided food and hospitality and the sacramental ministry to which the people were accustomed. Holy Eucharist each Sunday was a grand celebration, and all shared in Communion. But there came a Sunday in which the minister gave the invitation to Communion, spoken both in English and Spanish, but none of the Hispanic community came forward to receive. The priest asked that a native Spanish language speaker repeat the invitation, but she was told: "The community has received word from their former clergy that they are forbidden from receiving Communion outside their traditional church."<sup>1</sup>*

Well, that's not so silly at all. In fact, it's a little heartbreaking to me.

"Whoever is not against us is for us," says Jesus. Whoever is doing good works in Jesus' name is doing... good. No one corners the market on good. And our earnest differences between Christian traditions ---or even between different faiths--- shouldn't prevent us supporting each other in helping those in need, as Jesus would hope we would help. A cup of water for a thirsty person is a gift, no matter the giver. Unless, of course, our intentions are selfish and self-serving in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Synthesis, Proper 21, Year B, 2003.

See, I think what Jesus is up against this morning is what seems to be our perpetual human habit of building ourselves up by keeping others down, being “in” by making sure somebody else is “out”, being more important by seeing others as less important, being right by seeing others as wrong. Is it ever really that simple? The “stumbling block” of which Jesus speaks that could trip up “...one of these little ones who believe in me” ...that stumbling block would seem to be a misperception of our own level of perfection and our self-righteousness. The Apostles said: *We saw someone healing in your name, Jesus, and we tried to put a stop to those shenanigans, because he’s not one of us.* What? Do you have to be a part of the in-crowd to be faithful? Does your being right mean everybody else is necessarily wrong?

Look, we Christians have genuine differences in how we approach the faith, how we understand God’s will, how we try to live the Christian life. But Jesus warns us not to let such differences go to our heads and prevent us from seeing God’s good works wherever they are happening. Whoever is not against Jesus is for him! And whoever follows Jesus acts first and foremost from generosity, from humility, and from love, not for personal gain, but for the good of all. I think that is what we need to look for. Jesus judges the works of those who serve in his name not by their individual status or their group membership or their level of education or their pedigree. Where the works bear good results ---healing, love, forgiveness, graciousness, humility--- they are good, whether they come from his closest friend, or

from a wandering tax collector, or from a simple fisherman, or from a woman of ill repute, or from an unknown exorcist healing people in his name. Or from a congregation in Edina. We Christians might have our individual franchises, but no one corners the market on the goodness of God.

Now, Jesus uses some pretty harsh language here to teach us to not get too big for our spiritual britches. And whenever these passages are read in church, I feel the responsibility to offer the following public service announcement: Please don't swim in the deep end of the sea wearing weights instead of life jackets. Please don't cut anything off of your bodies. I do not believe that salvation rests in the removal of offensive parts of our anatomy any more than I suspect most of you believe it. If it were so, I suppose we might all be hobbling to Church on Sunday morning, having trouble turning the pages of the Prayer Book, and seeing the cross up at the altar. No, I think Jesus wants our attention, and with words and images like these, well... he's got it. Clearly, something serious is at stake when we are tempted to believe we are better than somebody else in God's eyes. So... don't.

There is, of course, an alternative to removing our offensive limbs. Instead of lopping them off, we could put them to good use serving others in Jesus' name. Then the headlines might read:

**Christians Work Together to Serve the World in Jesus' Name!**