

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
September 30, 2018
Title: On the Mend: Healing Divisions
Scripture: James 5:13-16. 19-20
Mark 9:38-42 49-50

All around us we see divisions and some of them get pretty nasty. This week we have seen some of those political divisions paraded for us in vivid ways. At times, I found myself just turning off the radio and deleting the emails because my mental and emotional health needed a break.

On Sunday, we may come to worship hoping to get away from all the divisions and conflict of the world. We come seeking to worship God and to be renewed, refreshed, and reenergized for the coming week. The scriptures and the realities of our faith, however, sometimes seem to put the conflicts and divisions squarely in front of us as we find our faith challenging us about where to stand and what to do.

We may want to get away from conflict and division but sometimes we even find them within the church. Divisions can really hurt – and especially so when they are in the church, the place we come seeking sanctuary and peace.

Sadly, divisions within the church are nothing new. I do want to say, that I have seen fewer of those open divisions in this church than in many others. Nevertheless, today's scripture does seem to focus on divisions within the faith community – not only in a personal way, but in a larger sort of corporate way and it is still good for us to look at what can cause those divisions and how we can hopefully avoid some of those painful moments.

In today's gospel reading, the disciples approach Jesus because they saw someone casting out demons in Jesus' name. They stopped him from doing this because he was not part of their group. This is one of the oldest

challenges in the history of the church. Who is in? Who is out? Who belongs? How do we decide?

There are far too many people walking around feeling that they have been banned from a church, or at the very least made to feel that they were not welcome. Rather than affirming the actions of his disciples, Jesus surprises them by telling them not to stop the man. Eugene Peterson in The Message puts it this way. “Jesus wasn’t pleased. ‘Don’t stop him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down. If he’s not an enemy, he’s an ally.’” And then he expands upon this, “Anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side. Count on it that God will notice.”

The disciples have fallen for one of the oldest and most tempting traps of all. They believe that the church, or the movement, belongs to them. Because they were part of the original group following Jesus, they think they have a special place, and that they are the gatekeepers, getting to decide who is in and who is out. But Jesus has a very different viewpoint.

We live in a world where there are more varieties of Christianity than any of us can name. I googled it and discovered that there were 43,000 Christian denominations listed in 2012, and that the number is expected to grow to 55,000 by 2025, only 7 years from now. Some of these are very exclusive and think that they are the only correct form of Christianity – much like the way the disciples felt that day. But Jesus seems to be witness to the reality that there are many different ways to be a Christian.

The large number and variety of communities that work in Jesus’ name reveal to us that there are infinite ways to live and proclaim the good

news. Diversity is not the problem. The danger arises when anyone of those communities professes to be the only true church.

I want to invite us to think about this for a minute. God created all of us and made each of us to be unique persons. Many years ago, a good friend, observed that if we agreed about everything then one of us was either dead or might as well be. God created each of us with a mind, with different likes and dislikes, different personalities and different priorities. The things that I like may be different than the things you like. Our styles of music may be different. In this community we share some commonality about how to worship, basic expectations of worship, and understanding of God. We tend to look for churches that meet our expectations and our needs. But we still may have different preferences about what kind of music helps us worship best, how long a sermon should be, how often to celebrate communion, and a variety of other specifics.

This is one of the great truths about God's world and our place in it. Because we are not all the same, there are different ways of worshipping God that are meaningful to us. Some churches have praise bands, some have large choirs, some have small choirs, some have no choirs. With more than 43,000 Christian denominations in the world, the specifics of worship, community, theology, and practices is almost unlimited. We seek churches and places of worship that speak to us and help us be part of a community of faith that supports and nurtures us and others.

In some denominations there are very clear lines about who is in and who is out, and what the rules are. One of the things that I celebrate about the United Methodist Church is the approach that John Wesley, our founder, followed. While I may disagree with some of the official positions

of our church, I agree with and celebrate the big umbrella that is United Methodism.

In our Book of Discipline there are some sections of which can be a sure cure for insomnia but there are also some important gems. Under the section called “Our doctrinal History” we find these words, “While it is true that United Methodists are fixed upon certain religious affirmations, grounded in the gospel and confirmed in their experience, (we) also recognize the right of Christians to disagree on matters such as forms of worship, structures of church government, modes of Baptism, or theological explorations. (We) believe such differences do not break the bond of fellowship that ties Christians together in Jesus Christ. Wesley’s familiar dictum was, ‘As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.’”ⁱ

Along with this, Wesley also followed another important time-tested approach, “In essentials unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.” I believe that when we follow this approach, we can honor and respect that people of faith hold a variety of opinions on many subjects.

Early on, Jesus wanted us to understand that God is present in our diversity. God is at work in our world and so we are challenged to be on the lookout – to see where God may be working – even when people do not recognize God’s presence. I believe that he was saying that God was working through the man who was casting out demons in Jesus’ name, even though he wasn’t part of their group.

As United Methodists we believe in something called prevenient grace. That simply means that God is working in our lives before we recognize God’s activity. When we provide food for the hungry, or clothes for those who need them, visit those who are ill or stand up against

injustice and do so in God's name, others who may not even know about God are receiving prevenient grace – God acting in their lives, through our lives, before they recognize God's presence.

Jesus reminds his disciples, and us, that it is not a question of “who is in” or “who is out”. It is not a question of who deserves to be helped and who doesn't. It is not a question of who is on our side, or against us, but rather whose side are we on? Are we on God's side? Are we on God's side, even when it means that we must admit that we do not have all the answers and that we do not have a monopoly on the only way to do something?

What if we commit to being on God's side in every situation? What if we commit to loving our neighbors as we love God? Imagine having conversations in which we honor the image of God in each other. Being on God's side means being friends of God.

When faced with divisions, what would happen if instead of debating and arguing, we chose to listen carefully and try to understand what the other is saying? What faced with divisions, what would happen if instead of buying into society's way of putting the other down, we found ways to lift the other up? When faced with divisions, what would happen if instead of the bullying that takes place so often in our political world and other places, we spoke with kindness? What would happen if instead of holding a grudge, we spoke soft words asking forgiveness for whatever our part may have been in the situation that now is broken?

When we find ourselves in a conflicted situation, we can realize that going to battle will never work. By its very nature battle means that there are winners and losers, but I think one of the realities is that even the

winner become loser when the other side is diminished and made less than God wants them to be.

When division has already taken place, it may be that only a true act of love can help thaw a frozen heart. In the children's movie *Frozen*, it is only Elsa's true love that saves her sister Anna. In *Beauty and the Beast*, only the sacrifice for love allows restoration to wholeness. It's something we see in many movies and fairy tales. But it is not only true in fairy tales. An act of true love may be the only way to thaw a frozen heart and to potentially save a relationship.

At the end of the gospel reading Jesus tells us that we are like salt. Today we often try to avoid using too much salt, but salt was essential in Jesus' day. It was used to preserve food as well as flavor it. But, if for some reason, salt loses its flavor it becomes useless. It will still look like salt, but it will be unable to fulfill its important functions and will not be salt in any of the ways that really matter.

We are to not only look like salt, but we are also to act like salt. We are not only to look like Christians, but we are to truly act like and be Christians. As salt is used to preserve food, we are also to preserve the peace as much as we are able.

We are to preserve our faith. As Wesley preached, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Jesus told his disciples that the man who was casting out demons in his name should not be stopped, and said, "Whoever is not against us is for us." However, he did not mean or imply that we should water down what we believe so that everyone believes the same thing and we are left with nothing of any substance. That would be hard to do, considering that there is practically

nothing that everyone can agree about, including even whether the earth is flat or round.

While we are to respect other's opinions and understandings, it doesn't mean that we all have to agree. We need to know what we believe and why we believe it. The "in non-essentials liberty" needs to be balanced by the "in-essentials unity". There are some things that we probably all need to agree about if we are to call ourselves Christians. We may not agree exactly what all those essentials are, but for me I would say some of them are that I believe in Jesus, I believe that God is love and that God forgives us and wants the best for us. I believe that God walks with us every step of our lives. For me, those are some of the essentials.

To be salt, we need to not only look like salt, look like Christians, but also flavor and preserve – live and act as Christians do, and preserve the peace, preserve our relationship with God, and help others to also know God in whatever way we are able to do so. Generally, that is through the example of our own lives. Not only talking the talk but walking the walk.

The strength to embrace a total faith comes from within the community. We are to be salt for one another, and to keep our loyalty to Christ as the central purpose of our lives. Within that, we can honor diversity and with Wesley proclaim, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?"

¹ Book of Discipline 2012, Paragraph 103, Section 2 "Our Doctrinal History"