

**Homily; Rev. Robert Petite;
Church of the Ascension, Chicago
September 26, 2021.
Year B. Proper 21; Gospel: Mark 9:38-43,45,47-48**

I am fond of a phrase our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, often shares with us, “I follow Christ”, he says, “according to the Anglican Way”. He is referring of course to the worldwide Anglican Communion, of which the Episcopal Church is a part.

It is a broad and varied tradition, aspiring to unity without a strict uniformity. I strongly identify with Bishop’s Curry’s statement, and the sentiment to which it points. As a cradle Anglican, I have been spiritually nurtured within the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Church is my spiritual family, my spiritual home. I often proclaim that I am an Anglican up to my eyeballs.

As a young man, mine was a strictly old Prayer Book practice, where all the rubrics of the traditional Book of Common Prayer were followed but peppered with a sometimes cautious but confident Anglo-Catholic ceremonial.

In my youth I believed this was THE way to do things, so much so that I held a rather critical view toward anything different.

My attitude began to change however, when in my pre-seminary days I became close friends with Jonathan. Jonathan was what we called a “Low Church Anglican”, a person who tended to avoid all the catholic teaching and ceremony I loved. Despite this liturgical and theological chiasm between us, he and I became fast friends.

We went on to the University of Toronto for seminary, he to Wycliffe College, the low church seminary, where the evangelical side of Anglican practice was taught, while I attended Trinity College, the high church seminary. The two seminaries were located directly across the street from one another. We remained close friends all through our seminary days. We were ordained priests together way back in 1972.

Seeing others more clearly, who are different from us in worship, practice, and doctrine, in the life of Christ, is at the center of what St. Mark is attempting to share with us, and with his fledging Christian community this morning, in today’s Gospel reading.

The disciple John has come to Jesus informing him that he and his fellow disciples stumbled across a person who was casting out a demon in the Name of Jesus. John proudly declares that he and his companions stopped this person because he was not a member of their company. Jesus quickly replies: “Do not stop him. He is doing something good in my Name”.

It made no difference to Jesus in this instance, that the man was not of their community. “Whoever is not against us is for us”, he says to John. In fact, Jesus goes on to share that even in a small thing, like giving someone a cup of water in his Name, will number that person as a member of His Kingdom.

Jesus then goes on to say that “if any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck, and you were thrown into the sea. This reference to the little ones is not about children, but to the fledging members of these new emerging communities. The point is that we are not to get in the way of people who are doing good in ways different from us.

It might be helpful at this point, to be reminded that each of the writers of the four Evangelists have their own reasons for including certain stories in their Gospels. For the early Markan community, it looks like there were other Christian communities popping up all over Palestine, and there seemed to be both confusion and competition between them. Mark is using the teaching attributed to Jesus to try and clear up these concerns, and to point his own community in a direction that was consistent with Christ’s own teaching.

We know for certain that these conflicts arose because St. Paul mentions them extensively in his Epistles.

So, Mark is reminding us that Jesus clearly sees an exclusionary attitude toward other Christian communities outside his immediate circle on the part of his disciples as a significant break from his teaching, a sin that could easily cause members of his beloved community to falter.

Furthermore, Jesus adds significant weight to his admonition to John, by stating what must be some of the most difficult words ever heard by a follower of Jesus:

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; . . . if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; . . . and if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell”

These words were so difficult for some that the writer of the Gospel according to Matthew reduces them in number, and Luke leaves them out altogether (cf. Luke 17:1-4).

So, what is Jesus' really saying to us, and why does he use such disturbing imagery? Surely, he is not asking us to amputate a limb if we use that limb in a sinful way. It is my belief, and the belief of many contemporary commentators on the Scriptures, as well as many ancient philosophers and biblical scholars living shortly after the time of Jesus, that these sayings are not meant to be taken literally but allegorically, as striking images for the purpose of teaching. These sayings are rather like a parable, a story to help us from doing a particular thing, rather than punishment for having done it.

Perhaps the point Jesus is making in Mark’s presentation of the Gospel is that we all need to be very careful not to stand in the way of the core message of the Gospel, out of an interest in finding a secure place for ourselves within our own Christian community. I think we ought not to be so wedded to our own point of view, that we risk seeing the wisdom in the traditions of others. I believe this is a very difficult piece of Gospel wisdom.

Many of us have come to our own place in the Christian community by an often-circuitous route. Some of us are cradle Anglicans, some low church Anglicans like my friend Jonathan, some Anglo-Catholic Anglicans, and still others come to us from totally different Christian traditions.

When I encounter students in my pastoral education ministry, who have moved from one Christian tradition to another, I'm often interested in learning about the gift they bring from their former religious community to their new spiritual practice.

My sense of these dynamics is also informed by working side by side with fellow chaplains, pastoral educators, and students, who represent a variety of religious and faith traditions. The Way of Christ is a mysterious Way, and we often discover that we find the presence of Christ's love in unexpected places. My relationships with a variety of interfaith colleagues and students, is just such a place, as I open myself confronted by the wisdom and gifts of these different traditions.

We are all encountering opportunities for interfaith dialogue in a world where so many religious traditions are intersecting with ours.

The Anglican Way is my Christian family. I believe profoundly in its traditions, in its truth, and in its theological point of view.

I also believe that there are many challenges in following Christ in the modern world. As we follow Christ according to the Anglican Way, there will be a need to be well grounded and formed in this faith tradition that is ours. It is a rich and varied tradition, a tradition most especially suited to meet the religious and spiritual challenges the world currently presents us.

In our interfaith world we encounter people who live out a very different religious practice and tradition than we do. Our neighbors are just as likely to be Hindu, or Muslim, as Christian.

The experience of global religious traditions on our very doorstep has challenged the Christian confidence that we are the only religion with a claim to truth. We would be wise to remember that the most renowned early and medieval theologians of the Christian faith, grounded their theological thinking in the tradition of the Greek pagan philosophers, like Aristotle and Plato.

We live in a very different context than that of the writer of the Gospel according to Mark. What lessons can we take from his proclamation, that may be helpful to us as we seek to live out Christian truth in our time? What stumbling blocks are we likely to put up that may hurt the cause of the gospel message to the world?

The Anglican Way is not a personal privilege to be guarded and protected. None of us has a monopoly on Jesus and his message. None of us has a monopoly on the revelation of Divine Love. The Spirit blows where it wills. As Dante, the great Christian poet of the Middle Ages has so beautifully said: *"No one, while hope shows any hint of green, is lost beyond return to love eternal"*.

The truth proclaimed in the Christian message is that Divine Love is made manifest in a particular person, in the life of Jesus, the mystery of divine love made flesh. Perhaps Mark in his Gospel this morning is also proclaiming that persons may find the God of love no matter *'where'* one abides in relation to God. God's grace is closed off to no one, where the Spirit is alive and active. *"No one, while hope shows any hint of green, is lost beyond return to love eternal"*.