

**Date: September 30, 2018**

**Scripture: Mark 9:38-43**

**Title: KINDNESS /GOD**

There's a time-honored story about a Roman Catholic Church that was hosting a community Thanksgiving service. This was to be a first for the church and for the community. Naturally everyone was excited. With great dignity the priest led his three Protestant colleagues toward the chancel area when suddenly he realized that he had forgotten to put out chairs for his guests to sit in during the service. In a state of great agitation, he whispered in the ear of one of his elderly laymen, "Please get some chairs for the guest pastors." The elderly gentleman was hard of hearing, so he asked the priest to repeat his request. The priest did so a little louder: "Please get up and get three chairs for the Protestants." The old man had a puzzled look on his face as he rose to his feet. Turning to the rest of the congregation, he said with a loud voice: "This seems highly irregular, but I've been asked to have you stand and give three cheers for the Protestants."

I would love to have been in that congregation that day. It would have been refreshing to hear Roman Catholics cheering for the Protestants or Protestants cheering for Roman Catholics. One of the real scandals of our faith is the animosity of some Christian groups toward other Christian groups.

Fortunately, things aren't as bad as they used to be. It's been encouraging in recent years to see many Christian groups opening their arms to one another. This past October, newspapers carried stories of a joint celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Reformation Day by Lutherans and Roman Catholics, including a cordial statement by Pope Francis. Reformation Day, signifies the beginning of the Protestant movement in rebellion against the Roman Church. What an historic day when Protestants and Roman Catholics can hold out arms of reconciliation. Hopefully, the Protestants and Roman Catholics can concentrate on common enemies like, human sinfulness, injustice and oppression.

Our lesson today, includes a rather shocking incident in the life of Jesus. The disciple John comes to Jesus and says, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." Jesus said, "Do not stop him. For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us." Did you catch that? "Whoever is not against us is for us." Then the Master goes on to say, "Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name, because you belong to the Messiah, will certainly not lose their reward."

Wow, to me, this passage of Scripture, represents the exact opposite of what has happened in Christian history. Jesus is preaching tolerance for others who call

themselves by his name. Meanwhile, the disciples are trying to protect their brand. It appears to me, that we, Jesus' followers, have been more like the original disciples, than like Jesus. Look what's happened to us. We have splintered into thousands of different groups, and each one, feels that it has a corner on the truth. God must get a good laugh out of it all, if it doesn't cause Him to cry.

Jesus' disciples were upset that someone who wasn't a part of their group was performing miracles, specifically, casting out demons, using Jesus' name. They felt that they had a privilege no one else should have.

What a blow to the disciples' egos. They wanted Jesus to affirm them as his only true representatives. They wanted to know, that they owned the trademark, and that others were infringing on what was rightfully theirs. But instead, Jesus told them to let that man do, what he would do, to help those who were suffering. Jesus was trying to expand, their definition of what it means to follow Christ. He wanted them to accept people, who didn't express their faith, in the same way they did.

There are times when we too have a hard time accepting other people, even other Christians. We think that our way is the best, and that everyone who is a Christian must be exactly like us. When will we realize that Jesus, is too big, to be restrict to one denomination, one culture, or one nationality? There are people of every circumstance and every ethnic origin who bear the name Christian. Just think of how small and petty we're being, when we try to restrict Jesus to people who look and think like we do. Truth is always bigger than one person's, or one denomination's grasp of it.

Like too many people today, the disciples had a narrow definition of who were followers of Jesus. Jesus tried to expand their horizons. Jesus said, "For truly I tell you whoever gives you a cup of water to drink, because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose the reward."

That's an interesting statement. **It seems to indicate, that a kind deed, is more important, than doctrinal purity.** Think about the two instances cited in this short story. A man is casting out demons . . . As we've talked about before, we don't really know what that means, to cast out demons. Whatever it means, it means someone was suffering. And here was someone who was trying to help the suffering person, and he was doing this kindness in Jesus' name. All the disciples could think about, was that the man seeking to cast out demons, hadn't been admitted to their club. He wasn't one of the twelve. So they tried to stop him.

In the other example, someone is giving one of Jesus' followers a cup of cold water. In that part of the world, this was an act of great kindness. Water was scarce; the land was hot and dry. These folks giving the water, are doing a kind deed. There's not enough of that in this world.

Most of us are too preoccupied with our own concerns, to pay attention to the needs of others. And yet, what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus, if it doesn't mean, we're to be sensitive as Christ was sensitive, to the needs of persons who are hurting?

Jesus calls us to expand our understanding of his grace and his love. Christ is Lord of all the world. Wherever people offer one another a cup of cold water, he's there. They may not even know his name, but he's there. This brings us to our particular task, as followers of Christ. **We are called to introduce people to the Lord of kindness.** No person ever lived, was kinder than Jesus, and he wants us to do acts of kindness in his name.

Mark Twain once said, "Kindness is a language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see." Actually, kindness is the only language that communicates what it means to be the family of Christ.

Kent Millard, a pastor, has given us a paraphrase of Paul's beautiful homage to love in I Corinthians 13. It goes like this: "I may have a brilliant mind, a wonderful personality, and a healthy body; but if I am not kind to those around me, it does me no good. I may have a good income, a beautiful home, and an expensive car, but if I am not kind and generous in sharing them, I don't make a difference in the world. I may have great success in my business or profession; I may have power and influence over many people; but if I don't treat people with kindness, I am a failure. 'Kindness is love in action. Kindness is the pebble in the pond, whose ripples can change the world. Having the faith to move mountains is great; having hope in bleak circumstances is wonderful, but deeds of loving kindness transform lives and last forever. I may have many wonderful qualities in my life, but without kindness, they are not enough.'"

This is crucial. There's only one way to communicate the Gospel, that truly attracts people into the family of Christ, and that's with words and works of kindness. So often when people are doing what they consider to be mission work, they do so from a feeling of superiority. They feel that the person who is the target of their effort is distasteful, or even deplorable. They don't realize that Christ is already at work in the life of that other person through acts of kindness, decency, and concern. The only thing they really need, is a name for the redeeming work that's already going on in their lives. Our role, is to help them interpret what it is, that God is already doing, and do it with kindness.

The best way to witness to the Lord of kindness, is through our own random acts of compassion and love. This is the way to effectively communicate the wonder of the Gospel. It doesn't depend on labels, or formal affiliations for validation. It's offering a cup of cold water in Jesus' name, to anyone who is in need. It's recognizing, that when someone offers us a cup of cold water, Christ is already at work in that person's life,

whether they're able to name the name or not. Any time anyone, regardless of their denominational affiliation, is trying to help another, Christ is there.

An anonymous author has put it this way: Is anybody happier because you passed his way? Does anyone remember that you spoke to her today? Can you say tonight, in parting with the day that's slipping fast, that you helped a single person of the many that you passed? Is a single heart rejoicing over what you did or said? Does the man whose hopes were fading now with courage look ahead? Did you leave a trail of kindness, or a scar of discontent? As you close your eyes in slumber, do you think that God will say, "You have earned one more tomorrow by the work you did today?"

We don't have to earn our tomorrows, thank God. They're the gift of a loving and gracious Heavenly Father. He gave those tomorrows to us, even when we were unworthy, simply and solely as an act of kindness. Now, it's our time to pass on, what we have received, to others. So three cheers for the Protestants and the Roman Catholics, and for those of every sect, who are bringing kindness to the world, because kindness is another word for God. In doing your acts of kindness Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.