

**Sept. 26, 2021
Christ the Servant, Reston
Pentecost 18
Mark 9:38-50**

I would not open this sermon by calling the disciples Dumb and Dumber. I wouldn't use crude language like that to describe that band of ordinary men who, by the grace of God, became the saints of our church which we revere today. No, I wouldn't use that term. But, given their performance we heard about in today's gospel I might be tempted to call them Dim and Dimmer. Let me defend that.

Last week the disciples were dim. Last week they got into an argument among themselves about which one of them was the greatest. "I'm greatest! No, I am!" Jesus had to sit them down and tell them that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." But this week, they are even dimmer. This week the disciples saw people doing the kind of healing that Jesus did and which Jesus had taught them to do. Now, you would think that would be a good thing, wouldn't you? Other's doing what Jesus did. Others helping people to get better.

The problem was, the way the disciples saw it, these people weren't doing these healings in Jesus' name. So, get this ... they told them to stop healing people! And, if that wasn't dim enough, they went bragging to Jesus that they had stopped other people from doing ministry because they weren't part of the Jesus crowd. Jesus told them to stop that kind of

nonsense and gave them a lecture on curing their own short-sightedness so that they could better work with others.

A helpful way to hear gospel stories like this is not to think of the disciples as those band of brothers who just never “got it.” (Although, it is true that much of the time they just didn’t “get it.”) A more helpful way to hear gospel stories like this is to think of the disciples as us. *We* exhibit the same shortcomings and human characteristics they do. For instance, we have *our* way of doing things with *our* people for *our* reasons. We run with our own crowds. We buy into our own brands and look down on others.

Look at the way we do it with products. Studies about brand loyalty show that people will stick with their own brand of toothpaste or aspirin or laundry soap when the other brand has been demonstratively and scientifically shown to be better. Heck, we even pay more for the aspirin with Bayer’s name on it when the less expensive generic brand came down the same assembly line from the same manufacturer and had the very same ingredients pumped into it, the only difference being the label which was pasted on at the end. We are brand-loyal people.

It wouldn’t be so bad if this were limited to toothpaste and laundry soap. The problem is that we, in the United States, are brand loyalists in unhealthy ways. Our race becomes our brand and our concept is that other races may be “ok” but ours is the best. Or, look at the way political brand loyalty has affected public health. We have our red brand and our blue brand of political loyalty. If you are of one particular color you likely are vaccinated, wear masks, and do physical distancing. If you refuse vaccinations, don’t wear masks, and downplay the Corona virus, you most likely do this because your politics are symbolized by the other color and neither sound scientific data nor Anthony Fauci will convince you.

otherwise. It's your brand and you are sticking with it even if most of the people in the Covid ward with tubes down their lungs are of your brand.

At the recent 9/11 remembrance for the plane which came down in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, former president George Bush made a stunningly remarkable speech in which he made the point that the foreign extremism which motivated the 9/11 attacks isn't so different from the current domestic extremism which disdains pluralism and disrespects human life. He said that both kinds of radicals drink from the same fountain of intolerance. They have their own truth and will not consider other truths. Pluralism can be defined as a condition or system in which two or more groups, principles, or sources of authority exist together. For the intolerant there can be only one source of authority for the intolerant. Hence, the term "authoritarianism."

Oh, the lack of tolerance comes from both the right and the left, but at the bottom is a lack of mutual acceptance and respect. Mr. Bush pointed out that, on 9/11/2001 we reached out hold one another's hands. Twenty years later we have retreated into our own brands and will simply not tolerate the other. Instead of holding hands we are at each other's throats As one writer had put it, "We are not a Christian, or a Catholic, or a born-again, or an agnostic, or a pro-life, or a pro-choice nation. We are many peoples from many races and places, and of many faiths and belief systems."

Why do I need to talk about these things in my sermon? Because learning to live together is the business of religion. Living together is the business of the church. Living together is the business of the Christ who had to constantly remind dim and dimmer that they were not the greatest and it was ok if another brand of people were out there doing good things.

He encouraged humility. He encouraged open-mindedness. He encouraged open-heartedness.

We have a new supplementary hymnal in our Lutheran Church. It is called, “All Creation Sings” and it is packed with newer hymns. I flipped through it and saw that the birthdates of most of the composers were later than my own birthdate. Now, that isn’t saying much at all, but it is different than our standard hymnal where there are hymns which predate Christopher Columbus. Our new Minister of Music, Alex Bean, has introduced me to a hymn from All Creation Sings which I am excited about. It speaks of the importance of plurality, mutual respect, and this business of getting along with each other.

The hymn is entitled, “Build a Longer Table” and was written by David Bjorlin who was born in 1984 (which just may be after some of *you* were born!). As we sing it in just a minute we will sing of building longer tables not higher walls, broader doorways not longer fences, and will talk about feasting together as strangers become friends.

Sometimes hymns can say much more than sermons. Let’s let that happen now as we sing together the hymn whose words are found in your worship resource, “Build a Longer Table.”