

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes
at St. Elizabeth's, Culver
September 27, 2009
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B (Proper 21)**

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

Psalm 124

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

You folks have all seen the churches that have the sign out front with the pithy sayings you read as you drive by. There will be something about “spending eternity in the smoking section” or how “seven days of prayer makes one weak.” I have had church signs on my mind since Bill went before the town council and Karen made a presentation to the Board of Zoning Appeals. I decided if we could not have a sign on Lakeshore pointing people to the church, we could have a virtual sign on the bulletin cover. I could not resist a humorous message, and so I will direct your attention to the bulletin cover now.

Today's reading is an interesting one, and it is the third one in a series of very practical messages from Jesus to the disciples. First there was the washing hands lesson a couple of weeks ago. All of us can relate to that. This is an ordinary thing we do and see all the time. Then Jesus talks about welcoming a child and serving those who can't help themselves. Today's lesson has to do with divisions in the Church.

Now picture the scene here. Jesus is still sitting there with the child from the reading last week. The disciples have been talking about who is the greatest, and Jesus explains that it is not about greatness, it is about service. The disciples want to make it all about their service, and Jesus says “no.” Miracles done in my name are not in conflict with what you are doing.

Really I think this is the second part of what we were talking about last week. Last week it was “I am most important.” This week, it is “We are most important.” This is something that we see all the time in the church. I guess it represents some progress, but when I think of the struggles Christians have with one another, it really does boil down to people thinking they are more important than others or groups who want to exclude others. You can think of your own favorite story of churches being exclusive, but I think the message of the Gospel is clear. The Gospel tells me that if our brothers and sisters in another church are doing God's work, then that is just fine with Jesus, and we are not supposed to stop them.

This seems like a directive to live and let live, but Jesus is clearly not saying that. It sounds like maybe this is a message of “It is all good” and Jesus is not saying that either. He goes on to talk about how it is necessary for the health of a body to lose a limb sometimes.

I had a classmate in elementary school with bone cancer, and he had his leg amputated. This was a tough dose of reality for me in the 5th grade. This was a radical, horrible and disfiguring surgery for a kid on my baseball team. Nothing was the same for Tommy after the amputation, and in some ways nothing was the same for his classmates either. Now the story ends well because I tracked Tommy down a few years back, and he is healthy and happy. The point remains that everything changed in some ways.

I bring up this illustration to point out that this directive to “cut off your foot if it causes you to stumble” is not a casual thing. It is a violent, extreme act, that you would do to save a life and not without exhausting other options. We are called to unity as members of the body of Christ. We are called to live and work as one. Removing someone from the body may have to be done, but it is an extreme measure.

The part of this reading I like the most is the last bit about the saltiness. This was my virtual sign after all. We are all thinking of course about the guy in the workroom or the gas station who tells the salty jokes. Jesus is talking something else though. I will quote a famous “Old Salt” who wisely said, “I yam what I yam.”

Jesus is telling the disciples to be themselves. You can’t be something that you are not. Popeye was onto something. We are not supposed to pretend to be something other than what God made us. If we are salty, then that is what we are, and we have to be honest.

I am going to talk for a minute about denominations and tie these ideas together. You need a joke first. Don’t lose that thought.

You may have heard the one about the Episcopalian who arrives in heaven and is taken on the tour by St. Peter. They tiptoe quietly by one door and then continue. On the way back, they tiptoe by the door again, and the Episcopalian asks St. Peter what is behind the door, and why do we have to tiptoe by quietly? St. Peter replies that that’s where the Baptists are. They think they are the only ones here.

The beauty of this joke of course is that Baptists can tell it about Roman Catholics, Evangelical Lutherans can tell it about Missouri Synod Lutherans. It is a very ecumenical joke in this way, but it points to the fact that as Christians we want to exclude others. It is a human tendency. But it is not God’s will. In today’s reading, Jesus says that to do work in His name, it is not necessary to be “one of us.” It is OK to be a Methodist or a Lutheran or Roman Catholic. Doing the Lord’s work is not the exclusive domain of one group or another.

So when is it worth splitting? We split to grow. That is healthy. We split to evangelize and do mission work. This is God’s plan. If we split because we think we are better or more authentic or have the one true version of the faith, I believe we do it at our peril. Forget the joke, because we are talking about cutting off a hand. We can’t take it lightly. I believe that our divisions are wounds on the body of Christ. It makes me sad that the Episcopal Church is fragmented in some areas of the United States. I believe it makes Christ sad as well to see unnecessary division instead of unity and common purpose.

We need to be ourselves and we need to remember that it is not about us. It is about the body of Christ.

In honor of the annual meeting today, I will keep my sermon brief. I'll be talking about stewardship and plans for the church in a few minutes.

I want to leave you with these ideas:

First, it is not about how great we are. It is about Jesus and the work he has given us to do.

Second, God's work is not about fancy, exotic stuff. It is simple and it involves everyday activities and things like children and salt.

Third, the divisions in the Church are wounds on the Body of Christ. We should work hard for unity and focus on God's work and not our differences.

Finally, we need to be ourselves and be comfortable with who we are. Be salty.

I am glad to see each one of you here this morning, and I am thankful for your ministries and contributions to the life of this church.

I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

