

Pentecost 18, 9.26.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19:7-14; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

“Ministry together, in your name”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Good morning. In this morning’s gospel reading, Jesus gives his disciples, and us, the great example of tolerance in the use of his name. This example is so profound that it might well be named “Christian tolerance.” Jesus told his disciples in no uncertain terms that they were not to attempt to limit the use of his name by others who also sought to work and heal in his name. Jesus’ words, “*Whoever is not against us is for us,*” foreshadows the work of many churches and even modern ecumenism in the use of Jesus’ name by many who seek to follow him.

In fact, all of this morning’s readings point to a God who is at work far beyond the limitations of our understanding and experience. Like the example of Jesus and his disciples, Moses’s own assistant, Joshua, appealed to Moses to stop those who prophesied in the name of the Lord. Moses said, “*Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!*” Like Jesus, Moses did not seek to limit or control the work of the Holy Spirit among the people of God; rather, he voiced his hope that all people would be filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesy in the Lord’s name.

Though Moses and Jesus looked with tolerance and openness upon the work of the Holy Spirit and anyone who worked in God’s name, all of us know that we continue to live in a less than tolerant world. Even among Christians today, we know that many churches are not open to one another, and that many continue to act like Joshua and Jesus’ disciples, seeking to limit the scope of God’s work in the world. Though we know the work of ecumenism is vastly important to the mission of the church, we also know that Christ appears divided in the world. The ongoing divisions of Christ’s body in the world, and our attempts to limit the work of the Spirit to our own camps, is a reflection of our ongoing sinfulness.

Denominationalism and competition between churches and denominations is an enduring sign not only of selfishness, but of a lack of faith in the power of Jesus’ name – a name that offers peace and reconciliation to all people. We are even guilty today of using religious positions to amplify political agendas, further driving a wedge between members of Christ’s body, who are all baptized into the same name, who are sealed with the same Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ. To us – for we all take part in this – Jesus’ words are spoken, “*Whoever is not against us is for us.*”

Yet we continue to see churches that refuse to have anything to do with others or that limit their fellowship with other denominations because they don't like the prophetic voice they hear, or they don't like the work that other churches do in the name of Jesus. The sin of human shortsightedness and exclusivity is alive and well in the human heart. Perhaps we might say that the church doesn't grow because we insist upon our own way, rather than trusting in the liberating power of Jesus' name and the movement of the Holy Spirit over the church.

If today's readings foreshadow a need for ecumenism, they also reveal our own sinful modern denominationalism, which trusts in humanly created identities rather than in the identity that Christ's name gives to all people as one flock, the body of Christ. Both Moses and Jesus offer us a vision of God's tolerance and grace that truly liberates us to live for others.

In the modern church, some of the historical reasons for our own inherited exclusivity certainly go back to the Reformation and the inability of reformers to accept one another's gifts and differing perspectives. Some years ago when I was teaching at the seminary in Tokyo, in preparation for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I was doing research into the 400th anniversary of the Reformation in 1917. It was a way of trying to understand what the Reformation means for us today.

In 1917 the world was at war, and a great many Christian nations fought against one another, amplifying their religious convictions into political hostility. So great were the divisions in Europe and the West in 1917, that anniversary celebrations of the Reformation were often muted at best.

So as the nations of older Christian churches fought against one another in 1917, a nation of younger Christian churches sought to understand the significance of the Reformation. Japanese Christians were not unaware that 1917 was the first opportunity they had had to comment upon the Reformation, because for 259 years, from 1614 until 1873, Christianity had been illegal and persecuted in Japan.

One of the theologians who looked back upon 400 years of the Reformation was an Anglican church historian named Yamagata Otozô. Yamagata had graduated in 1900 from the oldest Episcopalian seminary in the United States, General Theological Seminary in New York City. Yamagata was an authority on the Protestant Reformation in England and taught at Central Theological Seminary in Tokyo until his death in 1941. Writing about the Reformation, Yamagata succinctly summarized the theological disputes and denominational splintering of the Reformation as "an unfortunate and unintended by-product of the Reformation." The Reformation's unfortunate

by-product was the splintering of the church that continues to linger in today's world.

Another theologian named Uchimura Kanzô, who was the first person to translate the writings of Martin Luther into Japanese, also looked back upon four hundred years of theological argument and denominational estrangement, writing, "we need a Second Reformation to reform the Reformation." Uchimura, like Yamagata, argued that denominational fighting over the purity of theological interpretation had lost sight of Jesus' gospel of love and tolerance for the work of the Holy Spirit within the church.

Uchimura proclaimed that we are justified not by our own interpretation of the gospel but by the free and unmerited grace of God received through faith. It is grace that changes everything in our lives. Grace is the tolerance with which God turns toward sinful humanity recreating us with faith active in love toward our neighbors. Grace – and grace alone – allows us to have faith in the holy name of Jesus while celebrating the differences of our neighbors and their churches.

I share this bit of history with you because the church is always in need of reformation. In Latin it is written, *ecclesia semper reformanda est* – the church must always be reformed. Whenever we think we have the gospel in its purity, seeking to limit the gifts of other churches, we have become like Jesus' disciples seeking to stop others from casting out demons in Jesus' name. Nearly a century later I preached at the annual Lutheran-Anglican seminary fellowship at Central Theological Seminary in Tokyo about our shared fellowship in Holy Baptism.

In baptism, we die and are raised to new life in Jesus, experiencing the power of his name. We are welcomed into the church as family and called to live in the triune name of God. In a moment, we will welcome the Stevenson family into membership through Affirmation of Baptism. At that time, I also invite you to remember and give thanks for your own baptism, which gives you fellowship with Jesus Christ and Christians here and around the world.

During my time as your pastor, I have seen the gift of Christian tolerance and an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit among this congregation, St. Mark's Lutheran Church. The Holy Spirit is leading this congregation and its ministries forward into new ventures in mission for Christ. This church continues to respond prophetically to the needs of the weak and the poor, the outcast, the stranger and those who experience discrimination.

These past 18 months, during a time of pandemic and social division, you have continued to respond to the needs of others with graceful tolerance, attempting to cast out the demons of our own age in the name of Jesus. For 18 months we have been a world in exile from one another. Like the

Israelites in today's gospel weeping in the wilderness, we have wept and prayed about the weight of our own burdens. Nations have been exiled from one another and denied the free exchange of trade and culture due to a global pandemic.

We have seen families splintered by social, racial and political divisions in our own nation. We have become suspicious of one another, even of our fellowship in the gospel. Against this backdrop of relentless discord, Moses' words resound in our ears, "*Would that all of the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!*" In a suffering world we are called to use and incarnate the name of Jesus in all we say and do.

The reading from James also speaks to us today: "*Are any among you suffering?*" Like Israel weeping in the wilderness, we have suffered and continue to suffer. This congregation has lost several members to Covid, many more have struggled and recovered from the illness. "*Are any among you suffering?*" are words all of us can identify with. Last week we had to cancel a baptism because a baby was suffering with Covid. "*Are any among you suffering?*" James encourages those who suffer to pray, writing, "*The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.*" The prayer of faith is prayer in Jesus' name. In baptism Jesus has raised us from death to life, changing our weeping into songs of joy.

It seems so obvious. We don't pray in our own names or in the name of political leader, we pray in the only name that has the power of forgiveness and resurrection – the holy name of Jesus. The one who prays is changed from weeping into joy. The one who prays is freed to sing and to prophesy. We pray so that we might overcome the demons of our own age.

"*Are any among you suffering?* People long for God's presence and grace. Today in our own age, we too weep in the wilderness. Prayer in Jesus' name will move you from death to life, from weeping to joy.

Together, we are in ministry in Jesus' name. Go out from this place again today, remembering your baptism. Pray in Jesus' name, embrace God's grace, and work with the tolerance of Jesus for all people – that their weeping might be turned to joy. Amen.