

September 29, 2024

Texts: Psalm 19:7-14; Mark 9:38-42

Title: "What Really Counts"

There's a story about a Roman Catholic Church that was hosting a community Thanksgiving service. This was going to be a first for the church and for the community so everyone was excited. With great dignity the priest led his three Protestant colleagues to the front of the church when suddenly he realized that he'd forgotten to put out chairs for them to sit in during the service. In a state of great agitation, he whispered in the ear of a lay leader, "Please get some chairs for the guest pastors."

The gentleman was quite 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'd love to have been there on that day. It would've been kind of neat to hear Catholics cheering for the Protestants or vice versa for that matter because although it's encouraging to see how there is much more acceptance and cooperation between different Christian groups and denominations in recent years, there's still plenty of animosity out there.

Our lesson for the day includes a rather shocking incident in the life of Jesus. John comes to Jesus and says, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in

your name and we told him to stop, because he wasn't one of us." "Don't stop him," Jesus said. "For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever's not against us is for us." Did you catch that? "Whoever's not against us is for us."

To me, it represents the exact opposite of what's happened in Christian history. Jesus is preaching tolerance for others but the disciples are trying to protect their brand. Seems to me that over the centuries, the church has been more like the disciples than like him. (Mention the denominational chart).

Someone, not related to their group was doing good works and they seemed to be threatened by that. They wanted Jesus to affirm them as his true representatives. But instead Jesus told them to let that man do what he would 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 were of a different faith expression.

There are times when we have a hard time accepting other people--even other Christians. I like to think I'm an open and accepting kind of person but I have trouble accepting people who seem to me to be intolerant. What do I do with that?

But surely, Jesus is too big to restrict to one denomination, one culture, or one nationality? People of all backgrounds in this world follow in the manner of Jesus. We're at our best when we seek them out with an open mind, and the thought that we can learn from them as to share our understandings of how to live the Christ life.

And Jesus also, trying to expand his disciples' understanding, said, "...whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

And that's an interesting statement. **It seems to indicate this: that a kind deed is more important than doctrinal purity.** Think about this example he's citing; someone's giving one of Jesus' followers a cup of cold water. In that part of the world you couldn't do better than that. Water was in short supply. It was hot and dry. It was the act of giving that triggered the "reward," not whether the giver or the receiver was "worthy."

This is what motivated the "Random Acts of Kindness" movement from a few years ago that continues today. Many of us go through our days too preoccupied with our own concerns to pay attention to the needs of others. And yet, what does it mean to follow Jesus if it doesn't mean we're to be sensitive as Christ was to the needs of those we encounter who are hurting?

Like he was trying to do with his disciples, Jesus calls us to expand our understanding of his grace and his love for wherever people offer one another a cup of cold water, he's there. You could almost say, "He's in the water!" Kindness, friendship, compassion...those things are the most powerful ways through which to share our faith.

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

Kent Millard, a pastor, whose writings I see from time to time, has written a paraphrase of Paul's famous love chapter, I Corinthians 13. It goes like this: "I may have a brilliant mind, a wonderful personality, and a healthy body; but if I'm not kind to those around me, it does me no good.

"I may have a good income, a beautiful home, and a fancy car, but if I'm 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; but if I don't treat people with kindness, I am a failure.

'Kindness is love in action. It's 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're not enough.'" This is crucial. There's only one way to communicate our faith that truly attracts people into the family of Christ and that is with words and works of kindness.

So three cheers for the Protestants and the Roman Catholics and for those of every sect and faith who are bringing kindness to the world, for kindness is another word for God. Amen.