**September 26, 2021 – “Working Together”**

Psalm 124, James 5: 13-20, Mark 9: 38-50

“Whoever is not against us is for us”

How is it possible for us to do as Christ commands, to work together for the good of the Kingdom?

How is it possible to work with those whom we disagree with?

How is it possible to work with those who seem different from us; both inside and outside the church?

Looking at the big moments in the history of Christ’s church, it seems to be a story more of suspicion and disagreement than cooperation.

The “Great Schism” between the Western Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox one

The “Reformation” that separated Protestants from Catholics

And the various movements, revolutions, wars, and smaller divorces that have created the church of Christ we know today - a church with now 40 to 45 *thousand* different denominations throughout the world.

This morning we heard what is probably the first example of this kind of suspicion between Christians.

This morning, our Gospel reading from Mark begins with John coming to Jesus and giving Him the news of a follower he does not trust:

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

Teacher we saw someone casting out demons in your name (seems ok, so far, what’s the problem)

Well, we tried to stop him.

Why?

Because he was not following *us*…

And notice something important here: John doesn’t say to Jesus “He wasn’t following *you”* but rather “He wasn’t following *us*”.

This stranger, this exorcist, he was really and truly doing the *Lord’s Work.* He was casting out demons in the name of Jesus Christ and healing people of their sins and unclean spirits; something Jesus Himself often did in the Gospels; something the disciples were given the ability to do back in Chapter 5 of Mark’s Gospel. And what was the disciples’ first reaction?

“We should stop him.”

“He isn’t following *us*.”

To the disciples, it was better for those people to go on having demons and unclean spirits within them then to let an unauthorized disciple do the work.

Here, months before the proper institution of the church at Pentecost, the disciple John is already crying foul about someone following Jesus “the wrong way”.

Surely, John thought, Jesus would agree with him, surely Jesus would put a stop to this strange Christ follower.

However, in response to John’s plea, Jesus replies with the truth:

“Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. 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.”

Jesus’ reply to John is essentially:

Do not stop him.

Do not worry about it. I, the Son of God, am still in control here. Do you really think that someone could cast out demons in my name without my permission? Without my spirit being upon them? And besides, to you this man may be taking your work, but there are other strangers who support you in it. Am I not free to bless all of them?

In this moment, Jesus shows John and the disciples that when it comes to the construction of the Kingdom of Heaven, when it comes to blessing the world and individual people in Christ’s name, the work itself is more important than who does it.

Let me say that again: the Kingdom work itself is more important than who does it.

Yet, how many times do we get this wrong ourselves?

And perhaps we are no longer involved in great schisms, perhaps we are no longer involved in excommunicating those we find unworthy, but *suspicion*, *otherness,* and *lack-of-cooperation* are still tools the enemy uses to interrupt the work of the church:

How many times have we gotten excited about a new idea, a new ministry, a way of blessing others, and then someone else or another church takes the lead and we lose interest?

How many times have we heard about great work going on at another church or a community group and we don’t get involved because we don’t like the politics of that organization?

And if you’re struggling to see yourself in these, if you’re saying to yourself “I’ve never done anything like that” let me try a hypothetical scenario:

Imagine that an amazing new ministry, a soup kitchen, opened up across the street from us, hundreds of people are being fed, hundreds are hearing the Good News, hundreds are receiving support they so desperately need, and then you learn that the person organizing all of it, the person responsible for this great ministry is your biggest rival! (your grade school bully, your ex, Justin Trudeau or Erin O’Toole, depending on how you vote)

Would you still be excited about it?

Maybe you wouldn’t do as John did this morning and try to stop them, but would you really be that keen to praise them and give them credit for their good work?

And yet, as Jesus says, we all like to be supported *ourselves,* don’t we?

“Whoever is not against us is for us. 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.”

In the Kingdom Jesus is constructing, in the world where those who share a cup of water with a follower have as much stake in heaven as those who lead the mission, it does not matter who gets the credit. It doesn’t matter whose name is on the sign.

We may think that the mission of Christ is ours to lose.

We may think that unless we do it *our way* and the *right way* and with only the *right people* then Jesus’ mission to save the world is somehow in trouble.

But Jesus says “No!” That’s not the way it is. I haven’t given you this mission to lose; rather, I have given all who follow me this mission to participate in the victory of!

So that whether it is our group, our crew, our church who does the work, or whether it is a stranger, casting out demons apart from us, no one can stop His Kingdom from being built.

Last week, the Good News was that “It’s not about us”. It’s not about our greatness, but actually our humility and our ability to welcome a child in Christ’s name.

This week, the Good News continues. Not only is it “not about us” as individuals, but it’s not about us as groups, as institutions, even as churches.

That may sound like a strange thing to say inside of a church but let me double down on it:

The church, this church, any church, exists in order to participate in Christ’s mission.

Here at St. Andrew’s, our motto, posted at each entry is this:

*St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church exists to proclaim the Gospel and share the love of God in our church and in our community.*

Friends, the Gospel is proclaimed and the love of God is shared in the work of *mission*, the work that Christ calls us into in the world, not to keep the Good News to ourselves but to share it in love and service:

Sharing the Good News

Proclaiming Christ as Lord and Saviour

Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, and defending the oppressed.

This is the work that Christ’s church is called to do in His name.

Not in our own name.

Not in the name of the building, or the name of the denomination, or any other name, but His name alone.

That is what John got wrong that morning.

John thought that one who did wonderful deeds in Christ’s name should be stopped if he did them apart from the disciples, the official Christ followers, but Jesus corrected Him.

In so many words, Jesus reminded John: Do not worry. I am in charge.

God is still in charge of the Kingdom and its construction.

This is not yours to lose, but all of *ours* to rejoice in building together.

Today, more than two thousand years after Jesus gave these instructions, more than two thousand years after Jesus told us “it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea” than it would be for us to cause another follower to stumble, where do find ourselves?

Where do we find ourselves as part of Jesus’ construction team, as part of Jesus’ mission to build the kingdom in partnership with other followers of the way?

In a word, we are scattered.

We are scattered.

We are scattered to our own denominations, our own buildings, we are scattered to our own missions, and we are scattered also to our own concerns, more and more often, our own survival.

What to do with this scattered work crew of ours?

This week, I was at a meeting of pastors and Christian leaders who serve in downtown Saskatoon, and at that meeting I was introduced to an idea that has been playing on my mind all week; the idea of “Bonding” and “Bridging”

After a bit of research, I learned that this idea comes from the social work and business world, but as Christ says “any who are not against us are for us”

Essentially, we (the church, all organizations) face a choice between focusing on “Bonding” or “Bridging” activities:

Bonding activities help us to create an “internal bond,” they help an organization to have a strong identity, they help us to be on a team, and to be focused on success within that organization.

Bridging activities are those that allow organizations to work together, they create bonds *between* organizations, they make us focus less on the “I” and more on the “we”.

For hundreds of years, the Christian church has focused on bonding. It has focused on bonding types of Christians together, types of people together, into similar types of work and mission. But there is a downside to all of this bonding: we learned a long time ago that the best way to get a good bond, a good team win, is to focus on who we are NOT.

And so that is what we focused on.

We are NOT like those churches over there.

We are NOT like those Christians in that part of the world.

We are NOT like those followers with that liturgy and that music.

As a rule, Bonding, more often than not, becomes “bonding against.”

The church has been doing this “bonding against” work since John ran up to Jesus that day in Mark’s Gospel: “Teacher, we saw someonecasting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

Through all that time though, through the two thousand years between that day and this morning, Jesus’ answer has remained the same:

Do not stop him.

Do not be a stumbling block.

It would be better for you to go down to the bottom of the sea with a stone around your neck than to cause another follower to stumble.

But better yet if we can learn to build bridges… Bridges not only between different churches, but bridges between churches and first nations, bridges between church and community supports, not in order that we may all “bond” and become as one, but so that we may live out the truth that whoever is “not against us is for us”.

This idea is nothing short of counter-cultural in our time.

To a world that says “whoever is not with me is against me”

Jesus says the opposite: “whoever is not against us is for us” (“us” not “me”)

To a world and a church that seems intent on splitting into different camps, different political ideologies, different Gospels, Jesus says “Stop!”

Do not work against your brother or your sister.

Do not be a stumbling block.

Do not stop one from doing true work in my name.

This is *my* Kingdom you are building, not your own.

Friends, as these strange and divisive days continue, as we in the church remain scattered, as many others bond with themselves and break with one another, I invite you to hold fast to the truth.

The Truth taught to us by Christ this morning.

The Truth that Christ has not given us this Kingdom to lose.

The Truth that, when it comes to following Jesus in the work of this Kingdom, “Whoever is not against us is for us”.

Friends, let us work as one body of Christ, let us work to build bridges with those we have been alienated from, let us work for the Kingdom that can not fail and for all those who will come to know Jesus, to follow Him with us in peace.

Amen.