

King of Glory Lutheran Church
September 29-30, 2018
Pentecost 20: Mark 9:38-50
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Someone is working for Jesus and they're not on 'our team'? Stop bickering. It's time to recognize God at work in the world and we are called to be part of it. Get above the 'rumble'. Now!

On Thursday night I was at the dinner theater, Midtown Arts Center in Ft. Collins and watched the musical West Side Story. It was a fabulous performance. The actresses and actors put their heart and souls into each dance, each song, and every line. If you're not familiar with the story line, it was inspired by Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Set in 1957 in Manhattan, a white gang, The Jets, and an immigrant gang of Puerto Ricans, The Sharks, decide to fight for territory. They call each other to a 'rumble.' As we all know, the rumble is more about skin color than territory.

Originally, the choreographer, Jerome Robbins had envisioned the musical to be called, East Side Story, and would be about a clash between Jews and Catholics. But when a flood of Puerto Ricans began coming into New York and real fights began, they changed the musical from East Side to West Side.

(www.history.com/news/west-side-story-was-originally-about-jews-and-catholics)

As I sat watching, I thought to myself, the musical was set in 1957, but it might well be 2018.

Skin color. Fighting for territory. Fighting for votes. Who is on which side of the aisle? You're not on my team, so you must be against me.

Remember where we are in Mark's Gospel. Jesus is still heading towards Jerusalem. In Jesus' mind there is urgency. God's Kingdom is at hand. They must act and now! The disciples can't quite figure it out. So instead of joining the fight with Jesus, they revert to human thoughts and human ways arguing about who is the greatest.

This week in the Gospel, we see them focused on yet another very human tendency. The tendency to draw lines and be exclusive. "He's not one of us!"

"Jesus, we saw a man casting out a demon in your name, and he's not one of us, so we tried to stop him! Didn't we do well?"

It's understandable. The disciples have left homes and families, sacrificing much to follow Jesus. They might think, "Who does this other guy think he is? We're the real disciples. We know Jesus. He doesn't."

But Jesus quickly says, "Look – anyone – anyone who does a good thing in my name – is part of God's incoming Kingdom. Whoever is for us is for us! Don't stop him."

Jesus understands time is short. It's not a time for bickering or power plays. It's a time for action and self-sacrifice. He knows that the community is beginning to take sides about whether His mission is or is not from God. There is soon to be a rumble – a showdown. The Jesus we see in Mark is one who says, "Look, this is not about an exclusive operation. Anyone who follows me is part of God's working in the kingdom. The war is about to start. So quit being isolationist and join hands with all who work in my name!"

We never talk about who is in and who is out, do we? We never use the words 'us' and 'them' do we? No, never. Unless you believe there is beach property in Florida for all of us sitting here tonight!

Unfortunately, at times, we the church haven't listened too well to Jesus' words. For centuries we've had tendencies towards the same inward focus as the disciples. We've looked with skepticism and even disdain upon other denominations and religions who we presume don't have correct theology; or at least as good of theology as we have. Pastors and clergy assume that congregations belong to them instead of the people in the pews who will be there long after we're gone.

We even talk about Christians and non-Christians, forgetting that those whom we might call non-Christian regularly offer their talents and gifts to bring good about in the world, or as we call it, God's Kingdom.

The Psalm assigned for today is Psalm 19. Verse 13 of that Psalm says this: "Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not get dominion over me;" (NRSV Ps 19:13)

To presume: to conjure, or guess, or suppose, or hypothesize without knowledge of the truth. Presuming can get folks in trouble as fast as falling into quick sand. Jesus tells the disciples to quit presuming and just plain get to work! The rumble – the show down is coming!

We saw a show down this week and I fear it's not done yet. Sides will keep rumbling because well, "You're not on my team, so you must be against me."

I listen to the news and then I think about all of you. Many of us are doing well. And many of us are hurting badly, trying just to cope with what we have on our plates. Bills. Diagnosis'. Hospitalization. Grief. There is enough 'rumble' in our own lives that we might feel we don't have capacity to hold much more.

In this text when Jesus talks about the unquenchable fire – hell – it's a reference to Jerusalem's ancient trash heap. The rubbish pit; full of trash and burning a slow smolder. Hold onto that image.

Jesus' words to us today...He needs us to keep on keeping on. It's a fight right now for the Kingdom. Get up – get up, up above the rumble, the heaping trash pit of nastiness. Continue to preserve relationships like salt preserved meat in ancient times. Be kind. Be at peace with each other. God is at work – in people we know and in *people we have no idea are working for good behind the scenes*. Because there are people who aren't Christian, or Republican or Democrat, or Lutheran, or white or black or from our side of the hood that are working towards good. God is in it! Trust that. Believe it. And then be one of those people.

With God's Holy Spirit behind us, we can do this. We can show our neighbors another way. We can have hope and strength in God whom we profess loves all people. Forgives all people. Knows the hearts of all people.

It will be enough if each one of us, allows God to work through our words, our actions, our love, our grace. Simply doesn't presume that we know or understand the vantage point of someone else. It will be enough if each of us decides every day to not be divisive. To be kind. To not assume. To follow the commandments of not bearing false witness, of not coveting anything of your neighbors', of loving God above all else.

Jesus says, 'Offer a cup of cold water.' Now is the time, the rumble is here, offer a cup of cold water. All you might have to give is a quick text, instead of a Hallmark card. A phone call instead of a casserole. A listening ear – 10 minutes instead of an hour. Do it in Jesus' name. Christ will know about your actions even if there isn't anyone around or a camera stuck in your face. Because God gives you and I the power to act in His name.

I'm certain many of you have heard this powerful message that is associated with Mother Teresa. Some say it was written on the wall of her room, others the wall of the Children's home in Calcutta. Perhaps it was re-written from a composition by Kent Keith (a sophomore at Harvard College published in 1968).

People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered;
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;
Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and your God;
It was never between you and them anyway.

(http://www.kentmkeith.com/mother_teresa.html)

Amen.