

Lectionary 26 Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B 2021
September 26, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

From whom would you accept a cup of cold water? And I don't mean who we'd refuse to take a drink from because we're being humble, but I wonder if there are certain people in this world that you wouldn't trust, or you would believe are unworthy to give you such a drink? Who, if they offered you a cup of cold water, would you accept from, and from whom would you refuse it? In our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells his disciples, "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 other words, if someone offers you something out of Christian faith and love—even if they're different from us, they have done well in the eyes of God.

But if we back up a little bit to the beginning of our reading, we hear that the disciples have just stopped someone who was casting out demons in Jesus' name because they weren't followers of their group. Even though this man was doing something incredibly important—relieving people from intense misery, and he was following Jesus' example in doing so—the disciples felt they had to stop him because he wasn't part of the "in" group.

And in truth, this is pretty heartbreaking. According to the disciples, it isn't enough to simply be a follower of Christ. It isn't enough to be seeking to change the world for good. According to the disciples, it seems, you have to be a certain kind of Christ-follower. You have to be one that toes the party line, shares the same theological beliefs, that conforms to the disciples' expectations, and is part of the right social and religious circles.

And then, when John shares with Jesus this report of what they did, John seems to expect that Jesus will *approve* of their actions. He doesn't ask whether or not they *should* have stopped this man. Instead, he offers a matter-of-fact account of what he and the other disciples did: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

For the third week in a row, the disciples just don't get it. They don't get what Jesus' mission and their work is all about. And so, Jesus corrects the disciples. "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." The disciples again don't seem to realize how challenging or significant their mission is, and Jesus encourages them to find and accept help wherever they can.

But then Jesus goes even further, saying, "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." Whether we're talking about amazing and life-changing deeds of power or a simple glass of water, Jesus' message is the same: even if they're not like us, even if they're not part of our group, they have done well, and it's not our job to get in the way of their work.

Now, very likely, this story is included in Mark's Gospel in order to deal with some internal conflicts that Mark's community was facing. We don't quite know what these problems were, just that they were significant divisions. And so, Mark invites his diverse and conflicted community into Jesus' story in order to reframe how they think about their lives, their commitments, their identity, and their vision of what establishes authentic Christian community.

And perhaps this situation sounds somewhat familiar. Despite the two thousand years between us, our world today doesn't sound all that different. We live in a world that is deeply

divided and polarized by the current political climate. And even the church cannot escape this division. In fact, the church has often allowed itself to be defined by these divisions. In today's society, we begin to tell ourselves, "You cannot be a Christian if you..."

- Voted for a particular politician or didn't vote for a particular politician
- Are pro-life or are pro-choice
- Aren't LGBTQIA-friendly or advocate for LGBTQIA rights.

Through this way of thinking, we begin to set our own standards for what constitutes genuine faith, or what defines a "good Christian." No matter what lines we draw, we find that either side of these issues could easily say "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." And even though we sing hymns like Marty Haugen's "All are welcome, all are welcome in this place," what we find in many churches is that "All are welcome in this place, *unless* you disagree with us."

But perhaps we can imagine that God is at work in and through people who call themselves Christian, even though we disagree profoundly with them on certain issues. Perhaps we can make room in our worship and fellowship and Bible studies for those who disagree with us without labeling them or stopping them from serving God. Perhaps we can refrain from trying to convince people that they're wrong, or immediately condemning them because they believe differently than we do, and instead perhaps we might try to understand what experiences have shaped their worldview. Perhaps in the face of all the suffering within our world, we might be able to see that there are good ideas coming from people who hold different beliefs than we do. Ultimately the question remains the same: can we accept a cup of cold water from someone who does not follow us?

Now, I admit that there are some *really* important and *really* divisive issues coming to a head in our world, and backing away from the fight risks the rights and even safety of others. We must continue to fight for justice and equality. However, that's no excuse to perpetuate the hatred and divisions we are experiencing and allow them to further divide our church and world. Instead, God calls us to try to know and understand the viewpoints of those with whom we disagree, and work together to create a world in which the life of every person and all of creation is held as sacred and valuable.

There are so few spaces in our world and culture right now that create room for genuine conversation and heartfelt engagement with one another despite the divisions in our world. *God has called the church to be such a place.* We are a place that welcomes the stranger, the outcast, the one who is "not like us," the one who holds different viewpoints than we do. God knows that we cannot take on the suffering of this world alone, and so God calls us to work *together* in service to the world. Even though there are deep divisions within churches and church denominations, God has set us all on this earth to work together to be God's hands and help to bring about God's kingdom here on earth.

At King's Kupboard, we have many volunteers from around the community. We could not do the work that we do if we only allowed members of this church to volunteer. I can tell you that I don't agree with every volunteer on every single issue. I haven't vetted them for good theology or for political views that match my own. And our volunteers certainly don't agree with one another on every issue either. But we have gathered together, despite our differences, to care for those who are hungry in our county. When someone receives food from us, they don't care if it comes from a Christian or an Atheist, a Lutheran or a Methodist, or a Republican or Democrat. What matters is that they and their family are fed. And so, we give generously, and we give thanks that we are able to do this important work together.

We don't have to agree about everything to work together in this world. God has called us to various ways of serving in our church, community and world, and what matters is that we give thanks for the gifts God has given us, and that we use those gifts to bring meaningful and life-giving change to our world.

This is what we hear in today's gospel reading. God calls us to be a church that approaches Jesus in a different way than the disciples did at the beginning of our gospel reading. Instead of saying, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us," God has called us to say: "We saw some people, Lord, who were....

 casting out demons,
 working for justice,
 advocating for those who have lost their jobs and feel rejected by the world,
 caring for veterans,
 protesting injustice,
 and so much more, Lord. And Lord, they were doing it all in your name. And they don't follow us, they're not part of our church. In fact, we really disagree with them on a lot of things. But we didn't try to stop them. Instead, we shook their hand and we began working alongside them."

This is the world that God has created for us. We will always struggle with hatred and division. We will always encounter people with whom we disagree. But God has created a community around us that is working with us to transform this world for good. And when we all work together, God's power comes through us to bring about real, and lasting change for those in need. Thanks be to God. Amen.