

Courage for Community

James 5: 13-20

St. Mark 9: 38-20

The hallmark church governance within the United Church of Christ is that of Congregational Polity. This is a principle premised upon the belief that all members of a congregation share equally in the rights and privileges of church membership. It further asserts that the local congregation shall be self determining, though encouraged to work collaboratively with other congregations. We do not have bishops and leadership within a congregation are always to be answerable to the congregation. We understand that no member is ever to be regarded more highly than any other member.

These teachings are in large measure developed from an awareness of the lesson from our gospel text today. Jesus strives to teach his disciples that though they are very close to him, they're status is not exclusive. Anyone professing faith and seeking to share the love and comfort of Christ with others is just as vital and equal.

Throughout the gospel of Mark, Jesus' disciples are presented as slow to grasp and embrace the meaning of discipleship. Here in the ninth chapter, we are presented with a troubling example their being all too eager to restrict discipleship to those they regard as equals to themselves, to those who have been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry and who can demonstrate their pedigree.

Jesus, however, makes clear discipleship is not restricted to a select company. Rather, any person professing faith in God, through Christ are permitted and in fact encouraged to practice servanthood. When our Lord instructs, "Whoever is not against us, is for us," he is not claiming there should not be appropriate methods for assessing whether one is ready for service; but only, that no one should be barred from serving simply because they do not belong to the correct group or know the right people.

For Jesus, as it should be for the faithful in any and every age, the issue is avoiding becoming or practicing partisan sectarianism. That is there is to be no exclusivity or special status conferred within the community of faith. We need only think for a moment to understand just how divisive and injurious such provincial attitudes have been and are to the church and to the larger community.

True, most times such attitudes develop from well intentioned concern and causes. I am confident the disciples intended to protect Jesus's ministry, but did so lacking the knowledge of the spirit. They were eager to demonstrate loyalty, but confused their efforts. It becomes so tempting and easy to assume a condescending air of knowing more than others and of needing to be in charge. But, anyone developing attitudes of superiority of righteousness and/or practicing a spirit of entitlement to leadership is clearly out of step with the spirit of the Lord.

Here I would state clearly, God does not want or need our defense, God desires our willing servanthood. Truly, I believe, many who choose to avoid the church today do so more from a sense of alienation born of being treated as second class. We who would follow Jesus need to recall the words of the old hymn: 'There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea. For the love of God is broader than the means of man's mind.'

Our Lord's teaching to the disciples was that they begin to understand and embrace, 'that when actions and attitudes and spirit are of mercy, justice, integrity, reverence and faith,' welcome and encourage such, for it is of Christ. Thus, again, Jesus rebukes any and every instance of blind exclusiveness,

arrogant assumptions regarding what is the “correct way” of practicing the faith. His challenge is in part an integral aspect of bringing sight to the blind. Exclusiveness in any thought, word or deed is simply spiritual blindness. As were the disciples in need of, the church then and now also need to have eyes opened to see the truth that will set us free.

This is also a vital aspect of the teaching in the book of James. And, James truly knew of what he wrote. He was one of the disciples, who learned and often the hard way, that servanthood was not about honor, privilege or presuming it our job to judge or tell others how to be faithful. His entire letter is focused on choosing to learn to practice the love of God as the most effective means for spreading the faith.

As he speaks in the lesson for today, his emphasis on healing is not so much on cures for bodily ailments, as it is a concern for bringing comfort and peace to the spirit, mind and heart of a person. It is not to suggest that prayer and anointing are not useful and appropriate in cases of physical ailment, but we must keep context firmly in mind. In this era, there was present a very real belief that most sickness and physical suffering resulted from sin. And, in such a context, prayer and the blessing of anointing with oil by the elders could and would convey spiritual restoration or atonement for the afflicted person. Confirmation of such an assessment is based upon the reality that though oil was considered a general medication in that era, it was by no means understood to be a cureall and any and every disease. And, prayer was first and foremost understood, as it should be now understood, to be a means of our expressing our spirit's need to God and listening for God's still small voice instructing our souls.

Prayer and anointing should never be confused with spiritual superiority. Elders, called and ordained, have been appointed by God for a specialized ministry with gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts, though different from other gifts provided for the building up of the community of faith, are not greater than or lesser than any other skill or talent, just different.

Jesus in his teaching of the disciples, and James in sharing that message with us, call for our endeavoring to work in collaboration with all members. We are only to defer to others when our gifts are not useful in a given situation and their gifts will meet the need. As we keep this teaching in mind, and strive to employ it in our congregational life, through prayer, I believe our efforts to create a healthy and sustaining ministry here will emerge. As Winston Churchill stated, “It is enough if something from our hands has power to live, and act and serve the future hour.

And, what better way to start than with hands folded in prayer and then open in anointing with the oil of God's grace and mercy.