

The Rev. Kate Byrd
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“Whoever Is Not Against Us Is For Us”

This past week I spent a few days in Nashville, TN, which was a fabulous experience, but not because I spent it on music row, or at the Grand Ole Opry or RCA Studio. In fact I didn't even make it out of Franklin, in the suburbs of Nashville. Although, I did meet a fabulous singer songwriter, named Cindy Morgan, but that's another story for another day. And, while I may have missed out on some of the fabulous and iconic sights and sounds of Music City, I still had (what I would consider) the experience of a lifetime. Because I was intimately reminded of what Jesus states in our Gospel passage this morning, “if they are not against us, they are for us.” If I were to be honest with you (or maybe more so if you would let me confess to you), I tend to be fairly skeptical of other Christians. I know that may sound odd, as a person ordained as a leader in our faith. But, a lot has been said in the name of the church and more so of Jesus, both throughout history and in the more recent past, that doesn't always align in my mind with Jesus' commandment to “love one another as I have loved you.” And, I have experienced and witnessed the ways we use our religion to uphold our own agendas, biases, and maybe more so fears, in hurtful and demeaning ways. Which I hate to say, has made me weary. Either way, this past week I spent time with our brothers and sisters from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church of USA, working together to find ways to uplift Jesus' commandment and share a Jesus Worldview. One that speaks to the love of Christ, the worldview of inclusion, and the hope of the kingdom of God here and now. Which was nothing short of refreshing, reenergizing and reinvigorating for me as a follower of Jesus, a Christian disciple and a member of the Episcopal church.

As I noted earlier this morning Jesus says to us, “Whoever is not against us is for us,” in response to his disciples who come to him in state of frustration and fear, stating “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” To which Jesus brilliantly responds “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.” I mean first, I would guess, casting out demons is not on the list of desirable occupations, and second, if they were successful why stop them? Don't we want less evil in the world? Either way, the disciples remind me how easy it is for us to find ourselves in an us vs. them state of mind. Where we become quick to assume, if they are not for us they are against us. But, the truth of the matter, I believe, is that for the most part, we want the same thing. Which is to be free from the fear and threat of possessive demons, whatever that may look like for us today here and now.

And while I believe we want the same things, I wonder if sometimes we allow the same demons we are trying to escape from, to take control and wreak havoc. Disallowing us from participating in and experiencing the miracles that are available to us in and as much as we are able to come together for the common good, and welfare of one another. But, how can we even begin to come together, when it seems we have grown and pushed ourselves so far apart? Our passages (both from Mark and James) today, I would argue, suggest two ways. One, as Jesus tells us in Mark, by not creating stumbling blocks. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” As Jesus invites us to listen instead of argue. Maybe even to hear people where they are coming from and work to respond out of love, instead of out anger, frustration, and fear. And two, as James suggests in our Epistle reading

by remaining faithful, and vigilant in prayer and spiritual practices that allow us to connect to the Divine that is all around us. Because, while it often seems as though simply asking God in prayer is not enough, I would argue that it does more than we might imagine if we truly enter into it with open hearts and minds. Sitting in the presence of the Divine, raising our voices together in praise of our creator, standing at the table with our arms outstretched. Making space and room to begin to listen to our God as much as we are able to listen to one another. Inviting us to give ourselves over to something bigger and greater than ourselves. Something like beloved community, something like a Jesus Worldview, something like the kingdom of God here and now.

There is a very real sense in our passage from Mark of the threat of demons, evil forces, and damnation. And while we could hear this as condemnation for our own feeble souls, I'm not sure that is how Jesus intends for us to hear it. Instead I think it is a warning, maybe even a plea, of the very real danger that comes when we live into an "us versus them" culture. If sin is (as I've heard it) is anything that separates us from God, then hell, I would argue, is that space where we are no longer in God's presence. If the divine is in each and everyone of us, then our own separation and division, (in my mind) becomes not only our sins, but possibly also our hell. As one theologian puts it, "hell is simply wanting to be oneself apart from God's grace and in isolation from others.... Hell is self-destructive resistance to the eternal love of God." And, since we are all invited and more so upheld by the Divine's love, heaven is not only more attainable, but readily available. If we can simply reach out, experience, and breath deep that love that loved us first. That love that we find in connection, the love we find in prayer and worship, that love we find in a life lived for one another. This morning it would seem the lectionary is inviting us to reach across the aisle to our fellow neighbors, whether they be from a different denomination or faith or even a different political party or ideological standpoint. To find what connects us, instead of what divides us, and lift that up as a prayer and a praise to God. So that we might be able to savor this one life, this one planet, this one invitation to embrace and share the Kingdom of God within ourselves and the world, here and now, today and tomorrow and forever. AMEN.