

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Pentecost 19
September 30, 2018

Embrace the World with a Hug
Mark 9:38-50

A hug is a holy thing. It is something more of God than of the world. It is a primitive and radical act of love and acceptance. It involves great risk. When you hug someone, you accept them, exactly the way they are. And you become vulnerable to them; they can quite literally stab you in the back, and you are defenseless. Yet you cannot give a hug without getting one back. Such is the holy nature of a hug. In giving, you receive.

The proclamation of today's Gospel text is that God was in Christ "hugging the world to himself," that God in Christ still enters into this holy relationship with each one of us; that this holy relationship unites us with every other person throughout the world who bears the name of Christ, calling us and in fact compelling us to embrace the world in the name of Christ, just as Christ has embraced us in the name of God.

You and I can choose our spouse and choose our friends, but we cannot choose our brothers and sisters. We get them by virtue of our birth into a family. So, the same is true of our birth by baptism into Christ. Whether we know them or like them or even want them, now these Christians are ours, and we are theirs.

The task of embracing this family into which we have been born is always a struggle. This struggle manifests itself in the conversation between Jesus and his disciples that forms today's Gospel text. These are some of the most difficult verses in the entire New testament. They are far too complex for one sermon. Yet they deal with issues so real that their complexity engages us.

The disciples see a man casting out demons in Jesus' name. They forbid him, because he is not following them. He was doing what they had been trained to do and taught to do and in fact had already done. But this man was not one of them. He was not an insider. He was not a member of the right group. So, the disciples tried to stop him.

The disciples were limiting the grace and the power and the presence of God to their own very small, very human ways of understanding. Christ was leading them to embrace the world. They had trouble embracing their neighbor. Christ was including all people in the realm of his healing power. They were excluding them from that same power. You and I make the same mistake of privatizing the gospel whenever we believe we have a monopoly on the proper understanding of Scripture; we alone have the proper way to worship; we have nothing to learn from the Baptists or the Methodists or the Roman Catholics.

In the life of the church, in our personal and congregational decision making, a “back to Egypt” committee always exists. It gives up God’s promise in favor of the false security of slavery. It wants to keep things small and stuck. It wants to go back to the way things used to be. It wants to keep the church a family affair instead of God’s love affair with the world. Among God’s people there is always blindness to the grace and power of God working in mysterious and mighty ways, blindness that stands in the wilderness surrounded by manna from the hand of God and says, “We have nothing to eat!” Blindness that would rather feast in bondage than to eat the Bread of Life in freedom.

To them and to us, this 19th Sunday of Pentecost, our Lord Says “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against us is for us.” Taking a child into his lap, he looks us all square in the eye and says: “Forget about trying to corner the market on my name. remember your brothers and sisters in the faith. Your relationship with them is so significant, so vitally important, so holy, it demands the costliest of sacrifices. That which causes you to sin, that which separates you from these sisters and brothers, that which prevents or destroys or breaks or interferes with this holy relationship begun in Christ, is better cut off, cut out, and cut away!”

That means you and I have to change. We need a new beginning. Life together in the body of Christ is different from life alone in the world.

Discipleship demands a changed life-style, in which relationships are more important than success, people are more important than power, a life-style centered in Christ rather than in one's self. The baptized children of God are called to live like the "died-for" people we are. Yet change is difficult. New beginnings always are. To change ourselves is the most difficult thing of all.

But such change is possible. It is possible for us to embrace other nations, and races, and cultures in the name of Christ. It is possible for us to embrace the poor and the pompous, the homeless and the helpless, the vicious and the victim. It is possible for us to change in ways we have not yet begun to imagine.

It is possible for us whose sin must be severed. Because the Good news of the Gospel is that Christ on his cross was severed from God, was severed for us, was separated from every human and holy relationship, so that he might unite us in holy and human relationship with himself, and with our brothers and sisters in him. Christ was forsaken for us that we might never again be forsaken. Severed as we are by sin, separated from God and from one another, cut up by our struggle to free ourselves from that which binds us, Christ heals us. Christ makes us whole. Christ gives us a new beginning. Christ restores our relationships.

As Christ gathers us around his table of grace and we share here his holy supper, this bread of his broken body makes us whole. This wine of his spilled blood joins us together. This one cup, which keeps the wine from running out all over the place, keeps the chaos of our lives from running out all over the place. This holy communion joins our lives to Christ and to every other Christian in redeemed and holy relationship. This experience of God's coming kingdom empowers us to embrace the world and one another in the name of Christ. This Holy Communion does so much: It offers us the forgiveness of our sins; it empowers us to do all sorts of things which we thought impossible; it joins us together with all our Christian sisters and brothers in the faith.

It was wrap-up time in the first grade Sunday school class. The teacher was wise and experienced. The classroom was filled with eager and enthusiastic young learners. The hour had been a good one. The closing ritual to prepare the children for attending worship had always been the finger play: "Here's the church, and here's the steeple, open the door and see all the people."

The children had each begun putting their hands together and repeating the familiar rhyme when the teacher noticed the newest student in the class, a little girl who had only one hand.

Feeling compassion and concern, the teacher panicked. In all her years of teaching Sunday School, she had never confronted this particular situation.

Momentarily paralyzed in thought, she was relieved to see a little boy seated across the table reach his own hand over to the little girl and say, “Here, let’s make a church together!” Let’s make a church together! How very theological little children can be!!!

This little boy reminds us again of Christ’s compelling call of the Gospel, to embrace the world in its brokenness as we ourselves have been embraced in our brokenness by Christ, who was on the cross hugging the world, hugging you and me to himself.

So, let’s make a church together and more importantly, let’s be the church together. Let us hug those who have nothing to eat and support the Crop-Walk in a couple weeks. Let’s hug the people who can’t afford adequate housing and support the work we do here at Good Shepherd with the PADS program. Let’s make the birth of Jesus extra special this year to children all over the world by supporting Operation Christmas Child the Shoebox project. Let’s be the church together and hug the world with the love of Jesus.