

September 25, 2016
National Presbyterian Church
What Jesus Said: Significant Others
Mark 3:13-19, 31-34; 9:38-41, 10:13-16
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Jesus said: *Let the children come to me*

Jesus said: *Whoever is not against us is for us*

Jesus said: *Whoever does the will of God is a member of my family*

Jesus said: *You shall be called 'Apostles' – people who are sent on a mission*

In our sermons this fall, we're thinking together about the words of Jesus – statements that Jesus made on all kinds of subjects,

- From God's action in history (the coming of God's Kingdom) to our need to respond (the call to repentance)
- From politics to prayer
- From grace to generosity
- From marriage to leadership

And much more than this – including the words in today's Scripture which remind us that Jesus calls us to follow him not simply by ourselves as individuals, but together as a community.

In fact, one of the eternal (and necessary) tensions, not only in Jesus' teaching, but in life as a whole, has to do with the *role of the community and society* in relationship to the *role and importance of the individual*.

Here in the West in the past 500 years, it's fair to say that we've paid more attention to the importance of the individual than most societies have ever done. And, in particular, here in the United States we're the clear leader in our emphasis on the individual. And we can trace this emphasis back at least to **The Declaration of Independence** where we read these stirring words about the individual, that . . .

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (people, individuals) are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This is an extraordinary statement and expresses a very high view of the individual – one that the Bible itself would completely endorse when it says (Genesis 1:26) that every single human being is made *in the image of God!* – no matter who we are.

And in the midst of all the racial tensions of recent days and years – how critical it is for us to believe this, and live this truth: to look past color and even creed, to see the face of God in whoever-the-other may be!
Whether we see "the other" as friend or foe – Jesus calls us to love them! And why? Because they, like us, have been "Made in the Image of God!"

So, the Bible has this high view of the individual that we are called to embrace. But at the same time the Bible also has a high view of Community, and calls us not to go it alone in our faith but to live out our faith in Community with others.

So these two passions of God are to be held in tension:

- Both the importance of our Individuality
- and the importance of Belonging to a Community, both, side by side, with no abandoning of one for the other. It's not "either/or," BUT "both/and."

Which is a tension we clearly see when we go back to the Old Testament part of our Bible.

In the Old Testament, the individual matters – but so too does the group.

For example, sometimes we find in the Old Testament long lists of names (generally genealogies) that may seem to be boring and endless, so the temptation is to skip over them! BUT they are not insignificant: It's our names, (isn't it?) which are in large measure the markers that preserve our individuality. So at the least, these are lists that affirm the importance of individuals, long gone to us, but known eternally to God, by name.

Yet, the fact is, that these lists – with their names – are preserved only because the individuals belong to a group – a tribe, a nation, a profession.

So the Old Testament holds in balance the importance of our individuality as well as the importance of our belonging to a group or community.

And the same is true, and can be seen, with Jesus in our Scripture readings in Mark's Gospel

- The story of the calling together of the twelve closest disciples
- And the story of his mother and brothers
- And the story of the children
- and the people outside the group

These are not just interesting incidents in Jesus' life BUT reflect crucial moments in which Jesus sets his agenda for your life and mine – calling us to follow him, not just as individuals but together in community as a church.

So that Jesus' teaching from the outset is not just about individual *behavior* but about *belonging*: belonging not only to God, but to others who are significant to us, and for whom, we too are significant.

1. What he wants first of all, is a community where we are to be known by name as individuals treasured by God.

As in the Old Testament, the list of names of the twelve disciples in Mark 3 is not an accident.

We know the names of

- Simon-Peter, and James and John,
- Andrew and Philip,
- Bartholomew and Matthew,
- Thomas, (and) James
- Thaddaeus, (and) Simon, and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him –

because everyone else in the early church knew them too! Even the one with shaky faith matters to Jesus!

Jesus wants a community first of all where we are to be known by name as individuals treasured by God.

2. BUT more than that, what he also wants is a community with a sense of mission and purpose – a team to play *his* game!

What Mark 3 also tells us is that when Jesus appointed the twelve to be close to him, *he also named them “apostles.”*

The word “***apostle***” is a Greek word, which means *someone who is sent* – on a mission! So that this new community was from the outset supposed to be a community with a mission!!

Like a team with a coach. Jesus tells them

You are going to spend time with me, (says Jesus) – you’re going to be with me, BUT not only to enjoy my company! I want you to spend time with me, so I can equip you and challenge you to GO onto the playing field – into the world

- to share my message
- and to fight against evil, against what’s wrong and unjust in the world (to cast out demons) – together!!

And what we know -- is that they did it!! And they did it without superstars. Even Superstars cannot guarantee a win unless the team plays as a whole. There were no superstars in the 12. But still, because they got the message, and functioned as a team together, God used them to turn the world upside down FOR GOOD!

The first church I attended when I came to the United States 45 years ago was not too different – they had no superstars! First Presbyterian in Schenectady, NY was nothing fancy. But what they had was a unified sense of community and a unified sense of team and mission.

Their particular mission (at least, one of them) was to challenge men and women to enter the ministry, and together (I believe that they were just over 1/3 our size – 500 members) over a 20-25 year period they fully funded the theological training of between 100-150 men and women in the congregation – including mine. (Their impact was enormous!).

And while our community and our mission at NPC may not be theirs – our prayer must certainly be the same:

Lord, build our community! Our sense of team!

Grant us a sense of mission -- Make us apostles,

Help us spend time with you, together,

So you can send us out together in your name

- *to share who you are*
- *to impact the world with your passion for what is right and just, together, as a church*

So in calling the twelve disciples, Jesus brings individuals into community and gives them a sense of mission.

3. And not only that, but in the third place, soon after, Jesus establishes a core value of the church – an essential feature that binds the whole community together. And he does so in a poignant moment when his family – his mother and brothers, especially – come to take him home (Mark 3:21, 31-35)!

Jesus is wildly popular, people are flocking to hear him teach and see him heal – and it’s affecting/de-stabilizing their life as a family. It seems as if he’s gone crazy. What they want is for life return to normal, to get their Jesus back home!

So Jesus' family comes to him when he's in the middle of a crowd. He's teaching, and they want to contact him through the crowd. So they send a message and the message reaches Jesus that *"Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you."*

And Jesus' response is clear and sharp: He's not going to go to them! Rather, he's going to leave them standing there!! When the message reaches him he turns to the crowd and asks, ***"Who are my mother and my brothers?"*** And then he answers his own question: ***"Here are my mother -- and my brothers!"*** And then he adds: ***Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.***

Now this is a stunning statement; a shocking statement; an offensive statement – and deliberately so!

[Though it's important to remember that Jesus' family wasn't offended for ever

- *In time, Jesus brothers become his followers,*
- *and his mother, Mary stays close to Jesus all the way to the cross,*
- *In fact, Jesus last human act was to make sure that Mary was taken care of].*

But nevertheless, the statement was stark and shocking and deliberately so – ***because Jesus was making a point that changed the course of history.***

The community he came to found, the team or family that Jesus came to found was not going to be based on family ties

- ties of flesh and blood
 - ties of race and common background
- but simply based on an allegiance to the will of God.

And this was a dramatic change, and would have been heard as such by those present. Until this moment in history, God's ancient people Israel had been more or less bound together by racial and ethnic identity: *they're Jews! They're descendants of Abraham by flesh and blood*

To be sure, here were exceptions along the way

- *Moses' father in law is from the tribe of Midian*
- *Ruth great grandmother of King David -- is from the people of Moab*

BUT what Jesus is now saying is that

- this racial connection is NOT so important any more
- Or, to put it another way, the bond of flesh and blood MUST BE of less importance than a common and shared faith, a common passion to DO the will of God.
- ***"Who are my mother and my brothers? Here are my mother and my brothers!"***
Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.

Of course, this is an idea that the Founders of our nation picked up on and pursued over 200 years ago when our nation was established.

In most of the world – then and now, nations are bound together by flesh and blood. And many of the tensions in Europe just now are caused quite simply by both the breaking up and the desire to hold together those ancient ties of race and blood. (The same is true of countries in which there is a strong ethnic minority!).

BUT in our country, ***It's not flesh and blood*** that binds us together as a nation – OR IT'S NOT SUPPOSED TO BE! ***It's not*** race, or family, or religion that makes us Americans . . . is it? What binds us together ***is not*** that we're

- Immigrant Americans or native American
- Black or White
- Protestants, Catholics,
- Jews and Muslims,
- Hindus, or those of no faith at all!!

BUT, what binds us together – **or at least should** – is our common allegiance *to the core values of our nation as expressed in the Constitution* -- **even** when we disagree on its interpretation.

--Lose that common bond of the Constitution

- treat **the constitution and the Bill of Rights with contempt**
- treat the First Amendment as if it were a nuisance standing in our way
- create second class citizens of any one group

and the bond of community, the social contract that holds us together soon begins to fall apart. It's this common allegiance to the constitution that holds us together

And what Jesus says is pretty much the same:

What I'm looking for

- is a community of individuals
- with a passion for service and mission
- based on a common bond
 - not of flesh and blood
 - not of race or tribe
 - or language or economic status
 - but of allegiance to the will of God

Sadly, of course, in history, this ideal set by Jesus has rarely if ever been reached. Race and family and economic status have far too often been the ties that bind or divide – which surely must make Jesus weep!

And sometimes even when the common bond of doing God's will has been emphasized, even then, sometimes, the core values, the rules of the game have been interpreted so tightly that they've become oppressive:

- a way to throw people out
- creating a hunt for heresy and heretics which has become painful and ugly

We too easily forget that Jesus welcomed children into his community (Mark 10:13-16); children whose ability to express their theology correctly was surely rather limited (though children can often say the profound! (Matthew 21:16)

Let the children come to me,
for of such is the Kingdom/community of God

And we've forgotten too that when Jesus' friends wanted to draw the boundaries of the community too tightly (Mark 9:38-41)

(Of course we need boundaries: every community, every nation in existence needs boundaries! Unless there are boundaries that define one entity over against another, there is

no community as such: identity and effectiveness will be lost – every corporation knows this. I fully grasp that boundaries are needed, even though they add complexity to life).

Jesus reminded them that, “Those who are not against us are for us!” In other words, Jesus warns them, “Don’t fear others on the outside! Don’t turn others away too quickly! They may do more good for you than you can imagine!”

The history of Jesus’ community – the church – has not always been pretty. But our calling from those first days remains

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– Individuals I know by name sent on a mission together

Is this how you see yourself? Is this how we see ourselves? And see others?

- called into a community?
- that crosses lines of race and class and family?
- bound together by a powerful passion?
- to do God’s will?

Whenever that happens, whenever individuals and a community catch that vision; when WE catch it: who knows what Jesus might do, and accomplish, through us!

May we catch this vision from what Jesus said!

And may God accomplish his wonders, even through us!

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