

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 29, 2024

Being an accepting Christian

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost. And so again today we read that our disciples and their drama seem to put Jesus back into teaching mode. It almost seems as if they have not learned anything!

Last week, as Jesus was trying to share the future of his suffering and death, the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. I often wonder if this is like the children dividing up grandmother's belongings before she is gone, or like most people when they get bad news - choosing to ignore it. Because, as someone who understands that grief has different levels, today we see that the disciples would rather focus on social issues, rules and arguments rather than face the possible loss of their beloved Jesus.

And this time, we see that they weren't just distracting themselves with talks of greatness: they actually wanted to be great. The cat's out of the bag as soon as John says, "We tried to stop him because he was not following us." John didn't say, "because he was not following you, Jesus." No, it was because he wasn't following "us." We can give John the benefit of the doubt that Jesus was at least included in the "us". But even still, in their own minds, the disciples seemed to have lumped themselves in with Jesus in terms of authority and leadership. Idolatry alert!

It is definitely clear that they have missed the message of impending death Jesus was trying to impart, and they have now in fact begun their own little clique. We will exclude others who use your name Jesus, even if they are doing good because they don't hang with us. One can hear the resemblance to the arguments held by the Pharisees and scribes without much difficulty.

The disciples wanted to still have exclusions, a human disposition, it seems. Excluding others requires reasons, and behind those reasons is usually some sort of feeling of superiority. Jesus can also see that the welcoming of the little child mentioned earlier has not taken root; as Jesus repeats again, that the least of these are the most important to God.

This issue is quite alive today. There are a lot of people who are using the banner of Christianity to their advantage, and in ways that seem so very contrary to the message of the gospel and the kingdom of God. Yet, we are not to judge, as Jesus' words here tell us to trust that their time will come and God will put forth the truth.

As we decide how to respond to those lesser Christian representatives, associate, or even denounce them, Jesus' words point us to consider not their words, but instead the fruit of their work: are they helping people, or are they jockeying for power? If we take Jesus' words here seriously, he's not talking about people who "help" others know their sin, but rather about people who give someone a glass of water: meeting real needs, right now.

"Helping" people know their sins and why they shouldn't belong is the work of exclusion based on one's perceived power. Overall, in this little conversation into how Jesus' name is used—either in welcoming or in excluding; in service of others, or as a way of shoring up exclusionary power—we see that the disciples are just like so many of the other religious leaders we've encountered in the gospel. They are in need of repentance.

R.T. France in his book *The Gospel of Mark*, frames Jesus' words as invitation: "The effect of this scripture is to encourage a welcoming openness on the part of Jesus' disciples which is in stark contrast to the protective exclusiveness more often associated with religious groups."

In other words, there's still time for them, and us, to change!

Jesus starts them on that road of change by spending more time responding to the heart issue than the presenting concern. Like he did with the Pharisees and the crowd regarding the source of true purity in, Jesus lays out for his disciples that the sin they need to concern themselves with is their own, not the guy using Jesus' name to heal people. He does so by framing their exclusion as causing others and themselves to stumble.

This section of Jesus' teachings is a great example of how all of the law and the prophets hang on just two commands: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Then Jesus gives a startling example. By using hyperbole (Jesus doesn't want them to literally cut off their body parts), Jesus is attempting to grab their attention and shake them loose from their set way of thinking about these things. Focusing on externals, especially the externals of others, leads to the idolatrous act of thinking of ourselves as judge, juror, and God. This, in turn, usually leads to a pattern of becoming blind to our own sin and shortcomings. If we stop and practice some self-examination, we risk jeopardizing our feelings of superiority and will likely be confronted with our own idolatry — that we love ourselves more than we love God. That we know what is best for us, even if God lays a different path in front of us.

Being purified is good, Jesus says to them at the end of our passage this week.

Suffering a little now for the sake of becoming more like God, instead of trying to be God - giving up the things (sin) that don't belong to God now - so that we might begin to experience the joys of heaven even in this life, this is what it means to lose our lives in order to gain it.

To love God by "having salt", a command in the present tense to purify ourselves, and to love our neighbors by "being at peace" with one another (also a command in the

present tense) is Jesus telling us to be in the present moment and love those around us, no strings attached.

This is, of course, a welcoming stance built on trust that those who call upon the name of the Lord for justification of their actions - whether for their own gain or in service to others - will meet God and answer for their use of God's name. I know here at Christ the Lord we are welcoming, let's make sure we stay that way. We are called to stop building walls, one stumbling block at a time... Amen