

## **“In or Out?”**

*Sermon by Rev. Glenn Brumbaugh*

**Pentecost 19, Year B**

30<sup>th</sup> September, 2018

*James 5:13-20 MSG / Mark 9:38-50 NRSV*

When we think of our faith, do we ever think in terms of people being “in or out?”

In other words, are there people that meet certain requirements to be included,  
while all others are excluded?

The Christian religion has had a number of litmus tests throughout its existence  
to define just that.

In the early Catholic church, one had to be baptized as an infant  
and go through confirmation to be assured of being “included.”

With the predestination concept of Calvin,

God already decided who was in and who was out,  
and you prayed you were one of the select.

Then with the rise of evangelical fundamentalism,

which was the tradition I was raised in,

you needed to say the sinner’s prayer,  
and have a conversion “experience” to qualify.

We certainly seem to be good at establishing criteria to define our own salvation,  
as well as the salvation of others.

So where do we get all these qualifications and requirements?

Well, many have some basis in scripture.

The Great Commission in Matthew 28

tells us to make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In Acts, baptism goes hand in hand

with the multitudes that were converted.

1 John 1 indicates that we should confess our sins

to be forgiven and cleansed.

In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus we must be born again,

and cleansed by water and spirit.

So the basic concepts are there in scripture,

but far from the neatly defined criteria

we have established over the millenia.

So who is in and who is out, and how do we make that determination?

Should we even think in those terms?

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus does shed some light on this question.

To give this some context, in the verses preceding today's reading,

the disciples are arguing among them as to who is the greatest.

Then we have today's story where John informs Jesus

That they put a stop to someone doing exorcisms in Jesus' name

because he was not following "us."

That's a very interesting choice of vocabulary, and a little telling, I think.

John didn't say the problem was that the person casting out demons  
wasn't following Jesus,  
he wasn't following "us."

These same men who were just arguing about  
who was greater in their little organization  
are now deciding who belongs and who doesn't,  
based on membership in their club.

Does that sound familiar?

I think most of us have a sense of those who are like us, and those who are different.

Growing up, I had a real sense  
of who met the "criteria" of our brand of Christianity, and who didn't.

I don't remember it ever being said explicitly,  
but I always had the sense  
that there were those who called themselves "Christians"  
but weren't really saved.

Our denomination had missions to Germany and France  
to convert those wayward Catholics to our brand of faith.

We see it in our own denomination.

There's the progressives and the conservatives,  
and both sides see the other as following a faith  
that's errant in its interpretation, and not part of "us."

But it's not just in church circles that we feel this tension

between “us” and “them,” between who’s in and who’s out.

In every aspect of our lives there are those who are more like us than others.

In ethnicity and culture,

there’s a wide array of differences and appearances.

In income level and class,

there are those with more, and those with less,

those who can dress well, and those who are lucky to have clean

clothes to wear.

Even those who are Christian, and those who practice other faiths,

or no faith at all.

We all like to feel comfortable and ease,

and we have more in common often with people

who have similar backgrounds and experiences,

so naturally we gravitate to those groups

we can more easily identify with.

The problem occurs when we respond as the disciples

and dismiss those who aren’t with “us,” who aren’t part of our group.

Jesus tells us in today’s scripture that “those who aren’t against us are for us.”

How easy is it though, for us to start to see those who are different from us

as being “against” us?

Of being suspicious of those who look or think differently?

We certainly hear enough

about how threatening those outside our particular group can be  
in the public arena.

The liberal conspiracies, the callous cruelty of conservatives,  
the dangerous immigrant, the minorities in the inner cities,  
the threat of Islam and Sharia law, the list goes on and on.

The question is, are those suspicions really that accurate?

I'm reminded of the old stereotype that politicians  
are likely to "massage the truth" a little bit.

That's probably as generous as that can be said.

With that in mind, I found it interesting recently  
when PolitiFact celebrated their tenth anniversary.

PolitiFact is a non-partisan, independent organization  
that fact checks statements by politicians (and others).

With each statement, they rate it

"True," "Mostly True," "Half True," "Mostly False," "False,"  
and "Pants on Fire!"

After ten years, they rated 13,524 statements by those measures.

That's a lot of work.

One thing that I thought was interesting:

the most common rating was "Half True."

A little bit of truth, but not enough.

It is easy to mock politicians for their elastic relationship with the truth,

but to a substantial degree they are simply echoes of the human condition.

So often we believe what we want to believe

and ignore what we find inconvenient.

We even have words for that now, “alternative facts.”

As Christians do we hold onto the essential “fact check”

that we want as much truth in our lives as possible?

Do we push aside convenient lies and avoid misleading statements

because that separates us from God’s truth?

Or do we stigmatize others out of our own discomfort with people and ideas

that are different than our own. A better word might be judge.

Yet Jesus tells us not to put a stumbling block “before one of these little ones.”

We’re expected to let Jesus be our criteria, not our own insecurities.

If any part of us causes us to stumble,

we’re to rip it off and discard it

rather than risk losing our participation in the kin-dom of God.

When we feel ourselves looking down on a brother or sister,

judging them because they are different,

do we take a step back and reconsider the path we’re on?

When someone on the TV or the internet

tells us the evils of this group or that group,

do we let that lead us into fear and distrust

or do we take it with a grain of salt?

According to Christ, the consequences of our choice can be dire.

We can be with God, or separated from God and the kin-dom.

Jesus tells us we are “salted with fire.”

Salt had a lot of meaning in the ancient world.

It preserves and cures. It sterilizes. It is vital to life.

Without salt, we can't retain the fluid we need to.

It was so valuable that it was rumored in early Roman times,

soldiers were paid at least partially in salt.

The root of our word salary comes from the Roman word, *salarium*,

which means salt.

But most commonly, like today, it was used to enhance flavor,

to make food palatable.

But if it loses its flavor, it's value is greatly diminished.

Jesus tells us that we are to be people with distinctive flavor,

different from the spiritually bland world around us.

We are to be something entirely different from what the world has to offer.

Are we? Do we resist the urge to dismiss those who are not a part of “us?”

Do we buy into the stereotypes and misrepresentations

that others would have us believe?

It comes down to how we define ourselves and others.

Is our primary identity our ethnicity and culture, our neighborhood,

or our family connections?

Or is it our faith as a follower of Christ? Are we in this world, or of this world?

Do we have our own “in” or “out” criteria?

Our passage this week closes with Jesus telling us

to “have salt in ourselves and be at peace with one another.

Every Sunday, we share the peace of Christ with each other inside this sanctuary.

My prayer is that we share the same love and peace

with ALL those we meet outside these doors,

basing our opinions on the individuals we meet,

not by the stereotypes of the groups to which they belong. Amen.