

**The Reverend Marjo Anderson**

**Pentecost 18**

**Numbers 11.4-6,10-16,24-29, Ps 19.7-14, James 5.13-20, Mark 9.38-50**

**19 September 2021  
Salem, Bridgeport**

**“They’ Are Not The Enemy”**

In both our gospel and our first reading we have similar stories.

In our first lesson two men are prophesying for the Lord  
And because they weren’t part of the group, Joshua advises Moses to stop them.  
And Moses answers, “Why on earth should I stop them?! If only everyone would do as they!”

Then in our gospel we have a similar story.  
John tells Jesus, “We saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him,  
but he wouldn’t listen to us, so you need to tell him!”  
And, like Moses, Jesus answers, “Why on earth should I stop him?! What he is doing is great!”

Well, in our tradition we don’t often come across people who are prophesying or casting out demons  
so we might not think these lessons have much to do with us, but I think they do.

I recall a time a number of years ago at a council meeting when we were talking about evangelism & someone said,  
“Every time I go past Blackrock Congregational Church the parking lot is full!  
Why are they getting people and we aren’t?”  
And at the time I answered this way, “Evangelical churches have a different theology than we do.  
They believe that if someone doesn’t believe in Jesus they will go to hell,  
and so leading people to a conversion experience is very important to them.  
We don’t believe that so we don’t have the same motivation they have.”

The reason I said that is because that’s what I’ve been taught all my life.  
It’s how Mainline Protestants have defined themselves over and against Evangelicals.  
As Mainline Protestants, we have it right,  
and because Evangelicals don’t agree with us on everything, we see them as having it wrong.  
Looking back on it now, I am embarrassed for my ignorant attitude and words.  
I had been fed the party line and I had bought it, hook, line and sinker.  
Because Evangelical churches believed some things differently from me,  
I had automatically closed my eyes and mind and heart and spirit to anything they might be able to teach me.  
Years later as I actually got to know some Evangelical pastors and church members  
and as I engaged in discussions with them,  
I learned that much of what I had been taught was not objective fact but subjective propaganda.

I had been taught that Mainline Protestants did not interpret the Bible literally and that Evangelicals did –  
which is actually a belief shared by both Mainline Protestants & Evangelicals – but it’s not true.  
Because when it comes to crucial points in our theological identities, we cling to literal interpretation of scripture.  
Mainline Protestants, for instance, insist on baptizing “in the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit”  
because that is what it says in the Gospel of Matthew.  
And yet many Evangelicals baptize in the name of the Lord Jesus  
because they don’t interpret that part of scripture literally.  
And that experience made me curious about what else I had been taught that was not true.

I’d always been taught that the reason Evangelical churches were growing  
was because of their conservative theology which was based on simplistic either/or thinking,  
but maybe that wasn’t the case....  
And so on my Sabbatical I spent 10 weeks visiting such churches to see if that was indeed the case.  
And to my surprise I rarely heard any conservative theology being preached at all at Sunday worship.  
Now that’s not to say that conservative theology was not being taught in Bible studies,  
but it’s not what was at the forefront on Sunday mornings.  
What I found on Sunday mornings was an atmosphere of joy that radiated from people’s faces,  
an excitement as people witnessed to the amazing things God was doing in their lives,  
and a passionate desire to share their experience with others.

What I had been taught turned out not to be true  
once I ventured over to “the other side” to see for myself.

To me these two stories in our scripture readings for today  
are vitally important for our time and our place  
because we have been doing the same thing as those Israelites & those disciples of Jesus.  
We spend so much of our time distancing ourselves from Christians who are different from us,  
so uncomfortable with the fact that they are not exactly like us,  
that we tend to discount and dismiss and discard everything that they do.

And they’re doing the same thing with us –  
discounting and dismissing and discarding all that we do.  
But the fact of the matter is that none of our traditions has it all right.  
We each get some things right and some things wrong.

Which means that there are things that we can learn from each other,  
things that God can teach us through each other, and things that we can actually do together.  
Our Synod has come up with a new proposal that our council will be looking at tomorrow –  
a proposal that urges congregations within the conferences to collaborate with each other  
or with other congregations or with other social service agencies.

But when I met with the bishop and deans, I pointed out that once again the instructions were  
to work with congregations “like us”.

And my contribution to the discussion was to say,  
“Why on earth are we trying to work with congregations ‘like us’  
since we all apparently have the same weaknesses & suffer from the same shortcomings?  
Perhaps we should be looking at working with congregations who are different from us  
so that maybe we could learn a thing or two and so maybe we could teach a thing or two.”  
And the bishop said, “I think you’re right. We just tend to stay within our own little circles, don’t we?  
We’ll need to adjust that part of the proposal.”

Both Moses and Jesus understood that we don’t have to agree on everything,  
we don’t have to come from the same background and experience,  
and we don’t have to be part of the same group,  
in order to work together for the sake of Christ’s kingdom.

And I find it a very interesting God-sighting that these lessons come up now in the lectionary  
because the other thing that will be looking at tomorrow at Council  
is something that may offer a new way or churches to work together in Bridgeport,  
When I got the invitation to come hear someone from the Luis Palau Association  
speak to pastors in Bridgeport.

I saw that the mission of the Luis Palau Association is to “spread the gospel of Jesus Christ”.  
And my trained reaction was to think “That’s an Evangelical mindset. It’s probably about proselytizing.  
And that’s not something we Mainline Protestants do.”

But wanting to practice what I preach I decided to go anyway.  
There were about 50 pastors there, most probably from more Evangelical congregations.

But as I listened to Kevin Palau speak, my mind was quickly set at ease.  
He talked about how they used to be an organization that focused on Billy Graham type rallies  
but he said that they had discovered that their call was not just to tell people about Jesus;  
but that they were called help people and help communities on a practical level.

He talked about what they’ve done in their home city of Portland, Oregon.  
He said they’ve networked all of the churches together – both mainline and evangelical –  
to make an impact in the community that no congregation can make alone.

He said that they were about Word and Deed.  
They are about Evangelism and Social Ministry, about Witness and Service.  
They are about helping people spiritually and practically.

He said they’re not out to duplicate efforts of other organizations and social service agencies,  
but rather to support them, to help them work together, and to fill in the gaps.

He said that in Portland the congregations got together  
and discovered that there were three major gaps in their city:  
education, the foster care system, and refugees and immigration.  
To work with refugees and immigration they partnered with 3 denominational organizations,  
including Catholic Charities and Lutheran Refugee and Immigration Services.  
They made great strides in revamping the whole foster care system in Portland.  
And because of their work in education 70% of public schools in Portland  
have a congregation as a partner. That is a phenomenal success story right there!

The Luis Palau Association began as an evangelical branch of Christianity,  
one that I have been taught to fear and discount and keep my distance from,  
But that ministry has changed and been influenced by mainline Christianity  
who wants to meet the social service needs in their community.  
While the Luis Palau Association began as an evangelical branch of Christianity,  
a branch that has a reputation for being anti-gay,  
that ministry has been able to work with the openly gay mayor of Portland  
who in the beginning wanted nothing to do with Christians.

But Kevin Palau was able to say to that mayor,  
“I am sorry that you have been hurt by the Church,  
and I am sorry that you see Christianity as being narrow-minded,  
and I am sorry that we are known for our judgment rather than our love,  
but I assure you that all that we want to do is to help you.

After all of those riots in Portland, Oregon, when the streets needed to be cleaned up afterwards,  
who was it that the mayor called?

He called the Palau Association who with their huge network of congregations  
were able to flood the streets with members who cleaned up the city.

These lessons today are directed at both sides of the Christian Church –  
at the conservative Evangelicals side and at the liberal Mainline side –  
because both sides have been guilty of dismissing the other.

We don't have to agree on everything in order to work together for the sake of the kingdom. Mainliners and  
Evangelicals won't agree on everything.

Different denominations won't agree on everything.

Different congregations within the same denomination won't agree on everything.

Different members within the same congregation won't agree on everything.

But we cannot afford to dismiss each other or see the other is totally wrong, or refuse to work together.

Instead we need to be willing to see the good in each other, to learn from each other,

and to put aside our differences in order to build up Christ's Church.

For me, that is the truth and the hope that God has planted in my heart –

that as we reach out across our differences –

across the great mainline/evangelical divide, across denominations,

across class and race and sexual orientation and political affiliation

and everything else that divides – to share our gifts with others and receive others' gifts to us,  
that God will work in us to change all of us to be more like God's own self.

As we go about our lives this week, my prayer is that God will reach out through you  
to someone who is different from you or reach out from someone who is different from you to you  
to build a bridge, to build a relationship, to build a unity in Christ  
through which the power and the love of God can grow and flow. Amen