

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021B

The Holy Spirit gathers us today to ponder difficult questions. Who belongs to Christ and who should be excluded? Jesus offers a straightforward answer. "Anyone who is not against us is for us." (Mark 9:40) Jesus' words deserve repeating. "Anyone who is not against us is for us." They can be hard words to live by.

Each of the readings for today's liturgy invite us to become more aware and appreciative of the Spirit of God at work in others, even those we least expect. Both the first part of the gospel and the first reading are saying, look, some other people seem to have the Spirit, or are they speaking for God, working for God, acting as prophets, or confronting evil and replacing it with good? They are not one of us so should we stop them? This is a classic "them" or "us" scenario. It is the old tension between the Church as a "club for saints" or a "hospital for sinners."

The answer from Moses and Jesus is No! Cheer them on! They are doing God's work and God sometimes takes the spotlight away from us and gives it to others. The differences between churches furnishes an example. Because Christianity is divided into many churches, it has been difficult for their members to say good things about each other.

For many Protestants, Catholics were idol worshippers. And Catholics considered everyone else to be heretics. A "them" and "us" mentality: had Christian churches through the centuries paid more attention to today's Scripture, efforts to find moral and religious common ground would not have been so long in coming.

The disciples of Jesus were just like the rest of us. They thought they had a monopoly on truth so they tried to stop a man who was performing miracles because he was not of their company. Jesus replied in no uncertain terms. "Anyone who is not against us is for us." (Mark 9:40) He states the same principle even more strongly in John's gospel. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." (John 10:16)

When I became the pastor of Mission St. André, in the far North, responsible for the pastoral care of all the villages along the Hudson Coast and Hudson Strait, I was surprised to discover that my parishioners were not only Catholics. I was ministering to Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Church members, a Baptist family and a couple belonging to the Salvation Army. They all came together eager to hear the Word of God and to worship. Our liturgies were nothing like those here at St. Veronica's because they all included a pot luck meal, to which everyone contributed, and hours of socializing during which we often shared our beliefs. It was common to have conversations taking place in four languages – Cree, Inuktitut, French and

English. It was an incredibly spiritually stimulating environment. I learned a great deal from my non-Catholic parishioners that has helped me grow in my faith and my understanding of scripture.

Apparently Jesus did not limit his friends to his close circle of followers—and neither should we. Jesus' response is tolerance and acceptance. He adds some important comments, such as, a person does not have to do much to be on Jesus' side. He tells us that even if a person only "gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." (Mark 9:41)

Jesus welcomed as a friend any person who does the most menial deed as an act of love. Remember his description of the great judgment? He numbers among his friends those who had given a drink of water to the thirsty, given clothing to the naked, given bread to the hungry, and given shelter to the homeless. Simple deeds like these are ways of befriending Jesus. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40)

But how can we call helpers and healers friends of Jesus if they do not profess his name? It's one thing to say all Christian helpers and healers are friends of Jesus regardless of their denomination. It's another thing to say that Jesus recognizes all helpers and healers whatever their faith or the

lack of it. How can that be? The great Catholic theologian Karl Rahner speaks of "anonymous Christians," those men and women who are doing the work of Christ without ever hearing his name. Jesus is our friend, but like any friend, he wants our friendship in return. He wants us to be helpers and healers just as he is for us.

Here and in a thousand other places is our apostolic turf— not by papal or episcopal permission, not by patronage of our pastor, not by filling the gap and doing this work until we can find more people to become clergy. Here we are the Church, by God's gracious calling and the power of our baptism. To paraphrase Moses' words, "Would that the Lord might bestow his Spirit on us all."

