

Sept 30, 2018, Anthon UMCs, Mark 9:38-50, "I Am Because We Are"
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"I am because we are!" How do you like that title? It speaks to me. It comes from a term our new D.S. Ron Carlson, gave at his Installation message last Sunday at the Cherokee UMC. He first heard it as a translation of a word in from one of the 14 languages spoken in Zimbabwe. "I am because we are!" That one makes you stop and ponder for a moment.

What it means is that none of us are created to exist alone. In fact, in God's sight, we can only really exist as an "I" if we commit to interact as a "we." "I am because we are" is the necessary word of the day for our world, our country, our churches, the United Methodist Church in these testing times of trying to maintain our oneness, and even in our own church unity right here in this church body.

However, most of us are very aware something negative is happening in our world today, and it's frightening. And so, a second word of the day is "Polarization." We are so set in our ways we can't break free to work with one another: Conservatives and liberals, Moslems, Jews and Christians of all different denominations who scorn one another's ways of worship and refuse to work together peacefully for the common good, are rampant.

And I would be remiss not to mention the past few days it's easy to see the polarized politics of our country are about to destroy us, Republicans and Democrats, men and women alike. How do we give credibility to each other's actions when we consider our own party loyalty of uppermost importance and believe so strongly the other is not part of us? How do we find a way to live together in unity and peace when we are convinced our own group has to win at all cost even if lives are destroyed? Judge Brett

Cavanaugh and Dr. Christine Ford, whoever you chose to believe, if either, have been dancing to the beat of a loud political drum and we will continue to be treated to that sad maddening sound for the next week, throwing in a few riots and marches, until we either endorse Judge Cavanaugh to the Supreme Court or send him on his way, a ruined man. Either way, we will have seen a lot of shameful mud thrown before we get there.

As a safer example, let me share about what happened at the close of a meeting I attended back when I used to help plan the yearly "Sleep Out" where people stay out all night in cardboard boxes, etc., to bring notice and funding for the homeless. The Chairperson's wife for some reason, suddenly started telling the group a story of a man coming into their business office. He was campaigning for a presidential candidate. He made a political remark that was put such in a way that sounded very stereotypical and quite uncaring about a certain issue that was important to this couple. The wife pretty much told him to go elsewhere.

That's when I noticed the polarization in my meeting room as almost all of the 20 people there chimed in unison about how "that other political party" was so out of touch. I tried to ignore it but I could feel the outrage rising up within me at their judgment call. I was already an outsider as I was the only token rural person on the planning committee. This also happened not to be the party in which I am registered to vote. That's when I suddenly heard my voice ring out saying, "You need to stop being so prideful about your party and realize that there are idiots in both parties." (If I'd had time to think, I might have chosen better words, but these were the ones that just came out of my mouth.) I then noticed a quietness in the air, and one woman, who tries to be a peacemaker said placatingly, "Oh Sheryl, we love you." I said, in a low voice, "I don't feel very loved. I

wouldn't be here if I did not have the same goals as you do...." For me, and I thought for them, that goal was to fund shelters for the homeless. But suddenly I was judged to be an outsider of their group. Not a fun place to be.

According to our Gospel lesson today from Mark, Jesus is not a fan of polarization. He seems to give others more leeway than his disciples did or than we today do of people having the same goals, but who are not considered to be one of us.

Jesus' beloved disciple, John, reported on someone who had the nerve to think they could cast out demons in Jesus' name. (Talk about a controversial issue!) John said, perhaps expecting Jesus' to praise him for his efforts, "We tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Can't you just see it? Jesus' little group of disciples, all carefully taught, feeling that they had a corner on the truth and of the power of God and someone horning in on it who was not part of their group, of those following "us."

We do like people to have the same credentials we do for doing God's work. For instance, we like our Lay Speakers to have training. We like our preachers to be licensed, certified, commissioned or ordained. The disciples were aware that they were trained by the Master. In their minds they had the corner on the market of being properly trained Jesus followers. However, did you notice that John said, "He (the exorcist) was not following **us**"? When you expect people to follow you instead of Jesus, you are on dangerous ground, for who knows the mind and the will of God perfectly? And who follows God so perfectly that if someone followed you, they would be right on? Ah the pride we human beings have about who we are and what we believe being so right.

And Jesus gives one of his unexpected answers that causes a silence to ring out in a room. Jesus gets really inclusive on them...much more inclusive than the proud chosen

people of God normally allow. Jesus surprisingly says in effect, “Let him go ahead, for after he uses my name he can’t say that I’m evil. If someone is not against us, he is for us.” Well that simplifies it. That cuts down the number of those we can consider not part of our group. That includes a whole lot of people we might consider not good enough, smart enough, religious enough, not politically correct enough to be following “us.”

While Jesus does not open the door to every religious activity, he distinguishes this person doing exorcism from others in two ways. First the exorcist “does a deed of power.” The effect of his work is both extraordinary and beneficial—he has cast out demons. Second, he has done so “in the name of Jesus.” While it is dangerous to use Jesus’ name in vain, Jesus endorses this man’s authenticity which the disciples have judged as lacking.

The disciples drew a circle to keep the exorcist out, but Jesus re-draws the circle to include him in. The one who touched lepers, ate with tax collectors and sinners and took little children into his arms draws a wide circle. Jesus draws in anyone who does the simplest good deed, such as giving a cup of water in Jesus’ name – essential to life but something that almost anyone can give. The cup of water symbolizes any practical gift – food, clothing, shelter, financial aid, or helping get someone out of a ditch...in Jesus’ name...anyone who serves in the name of Christ shall receive their reward.

To be exclusive puts stumbling blocks in the path of anyone who is trying to emulate Jesus, but perhaps needs some help or acceptance in their following. Such ones who cause another to stumble see others as “they” rather than “we” get a disastrous sounding response as Jesus reveals he is dead serious about this issue of

inclusiveness. If you do anything to put down or destroy the faith and works of “these Little ones” (referring not to children, but to someone of delicate or new faith) who believes in God – maybe in a different way than you have been so carefully taught, just considered yourself worthy of a millstone around your neck and being thrown into the sea. Now I doubt that the Jesus of second chances, is suggesting that we drown people who cause others to stumble, but is instead is using a hyperbole – exaggerated language --- to dramatize the danger of causing injury to “little ones.” His point is that a person who causes such weaker ones in the faith to stumble, will suffer a terrible fate at God’s hands – a fate more terrible than being suddenly and violently drowned at sea.

Jesus must consider such behavior worthy of going to hell as he speaks in words that cause us to tremble, about it being better to cut off a hand, a foot, or gouge out an eye than to sin by causing another to stumble. Note here that it is disciples who are considered in danger of hell, rather than unbelievers. Both the stumbling Christian and the Christian who causes others to stumble are subject to judgment. Not words we want to hear in church on this nice, pleasant, Harvest Supper day in September.

Today we might re-phrase Jesus’ words this way: “If it costs an arm and a leg to resist temptation it is worth it. Jesus was always one to use colorful language to make a point and people listened.

However, if we do not take Jesus’ words, “cut it off,” literally, we must take them seriously. Nothing is more important than maintaining the faith. These sayings challenge us to examine the quality of our discipleship. Is following Christ at the core of our being, something too precious to be surrendered lightly? Or is our Christianity merely a matter of taste or convenience?

Jesus was serious about cutting things out of our lives. Discipleship does sometimes require amputations. We need to amputate bad habits – resentments – selfish ambitions, unforgiveness or pride that cause us to act unethically. Just the same as the recovering alcoholic or drug addict, the one motivated with a need for power or revenge needs to amputate old relationships that threaten to pull him/her back to a life of considering him or herself an “I” rather than a “we” So we need to amputate things that stand between us and God and we need to examine our lives to see what is keeping us from a close relationship with God and others.

When by polarizing ourselves from others who do deeds in the name of Christ we polarize ourselves from God, the saddest blockage of all. God is for unity all the way down. It's a trickle down type of unity, beginning with the unity of the Trinity, the three in one, passed down to the creatures God has made, the crowning achievement of which is the person sitting next to you, AND the person sitting far from you that you may not agree with, and the people sitting in churches in this town worshipping in ways we don't comprehend, and some believers not even **in** a church, all across the world.

This message is really a call from God to Christians to pull down the walls that divide Christian from Christian. The author of Ephesians talks about the dividing wall that separated Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. He said: “For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Eph 2:14.

That's beautiful isn't it! Christ has broken down the wall that divides Christian from Christian, Christian from anyone who is struggling in their faith.

I believe that is what our new DS was talking about when he humbly closed his message to all of us with the words, "Thank you for being part of my we."

Let us share our "we-ness" constantly. We will get a chance to share it today and tonight as we work our church supper, bringing in people who may not worship like us or even believe like we do in many ways, but I'm proud to say that we'll be giving them a whole lot more than a glass of water or more even than some delicious turkey. We'll be giving them the hospitality that tells them we are Christians by our love. Let the whole world know, "I am because we are."