

Sermon **Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost** Sept. 26th, 2021

Context - Context – Context

James Patrick Holding says, “*A popular phrase today says, “Context is everything.” While this may seem an overstatement, in reality, it is not far from the truth. Context is a governing aspect of all communication, and without it, critics of the Bible do little more than manufacture pretexts favoring their own agendas.*”

This morning, the Gospel reading starts with John saying, “*Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn’t in our group.*”

Now, I think that it is important for us to remember where Jesus and disciples are during this conversation. Jesus and the disciples just returned to Capernaum and they are sitting in the house. They have just had a conversation on who is the greatest. Jesus has a child in his arms and has just said, “*Whoever embraces one of these children as I do - embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me.*”

So, in our scene today, Jesus is having a teaching moment with his disciples with a child in his arms and John interrupts Jesus. John fails to understand again, what Jesus is saying about God’s reign and God’s anointed one.

This reading is once again a classical “Markan Sandwich.” There are two stories. He has a story within a story. Story 1 is verses 33-37 which goes back to last weeks reading and the context that I set up for us in the begging of the sermon. Story 2 is verses 38-41 where the disciples are uptight about an unknown exorcist and then in verses 42-50, we jump back into the first story.

Many individuals ask, why does Mark do this?

Michael Kiel says, “*Mark inserts a story within a story so that the readers can understand them and interpret them together.*”

So, how can we interpret these two stories together?

One of the ways that we can view these stories are that Mark is trying to share with us that the concerns, which can be translated as immature concerns, that the disciples have are the very sort of stumbling blocks that Jesus is warning them and us about.

The early Christians, the first reading of this text was divided. In particular, there seemed to be mistrust and wariness between the different groups of Christians. When we look outside of Mark, this is confirmed in the letters that Paul wrote to all the churches. The church faced disagreements about theology and disagreements on church strategies for growth and development. We, as churches, are still in disagreement.

In the gospel reading, it seems that this close-knit had jealousy and anxiety rising up because another community seemed to be making a similar claim to them.

Mark, in his writing, seems to have no real time for anxiety, jealousy, and an elitist attitude. He shares the words of Jesus by stating clearly, “*Don’t stop him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath slam me. If he’s not an enemy, he’s an ally.*” We have had centuries upon centuries of violence, mistrust, and ignorance to overcome.

We, as Christians and as a church, must find a way to express our beliefs in all their fulness while listening and striving to understand those of others. This is very difficult and extremely challenging. I fully understand that. However, if we are willing to listen and strive to understand, I think it can help us develop (1) common ground (2) growth (3) insight. I truly believe that we can achieve unity without compromising diversity.

I have so many thoughts running through my mind and I am not really sure which direction to go with this text and message as Jesus jumps back into the story and shares some hard truths.

Within these hard truths, I believe that there is a central theme. The central theme can be the virtue of discipleship. This week, I was wrestling with discipleship as there are many backdrops that are occurring at Bay View Lutheran Church. I am not going to specifically address the occurrence, instead, I want to address what we, as a church, need to do to get pass these occurrences. Are you ready?

When we think of discipleship, we must go to a deeper understanding. We must go to the place that I believe that Jesus was trying to divide his early disciples to. On the ground running, discipleship implies the art of living in peace with one's neighbor and doing what is good for them rather than cultivating the spirit of rivalry and hostility.

In the discourse Jesus gives his disciples, he gives them language they can understand. He shares a metaphor on salt. The disciples would have known the importance of preservation.

The words of Jesus when he said, if salt loses quality, it is no longer good. The disciples would have fully understood.

There they are looking at Jesus, with a child in his arms, listening. A lightbulb would have been turned on and they would have thought

Aaaahh, we should not lose the quality of discipleship by quarreling but to live in peace with one another.

The message that Jesus concluded with was straight-forward: *"a clear sign of discipleship is doing what is necessary and good to protect the so-called little ones about whom Jesus was so concerned in this passage and others"*

As I get ready to close out this sermon, I want to oh so briefly, jump into our second reading which was from James. I have shared with you many times and will continue to share that many times, the RCL does a beautiful job in pairing the texts together. In James, we can find a perfect example of communal living that reflects Jesus desire for the disciples.

In James, we see that the community is dealing with suffering, sickness and sin. In James, we see that community is bringing wholeness to the community by bringing healing to the community. The healing occurs by a three fold process: (1) summoning the elders (2) praying for the sick (3) anointing with oil.

It is healing, not being cured.

In this context, healing also implies social restoration.

Today is the last day that we engage in James, so let me finish off with some words from Michael Lodahl. His words are the following:

"When our lives have become intertwined by prayer, confession, forgiveness, and human touch, we cannot and should not dismiss the wanderer."

Friends, God is present among us. We need to be there for one another and I believe that we need to celebrate the great things that occurring in our individual lives and in the life of the church.

May we be a church that celebrates and live into the words of James by seeking God, practicing discipleship, showing no favoritism, speaking slowly and carefully and lovingly seeking out one another.

May God's love and grace overflow.

Amen.