

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“Including Not Excluding”

Mark 9:38-50

As I've mentioned from time to time, I'm a fan of 60's music. Some good stuff in the 60's. One song that wasn't good was one called "The In-Crowd." Maybe some of you may even remember it. The first verse went something like this – "I'm in with the in-crowd; I know what the in-crowd knows. I'm in with the in-crowd; I go where the in-crowd goes." And from there it went on to extol the pure "bliss" of being a member of the in-crowd.

Now, if you've never heard this song or if you plain just don't remember it, it's perfectly understandable. It's certainly not one of the classics and it's really not all that memorable. In fact, I probably wouldn't remember it either if it weren't for the feelings that it evoked 40-some years ago. You see, when this song was popular, I wasn't. I wasn't a part of the "in-crowd". I didn't know what the in-crowd knew and I certainly didn't go anywhere where the in-crowd went. I'm not sure I was even "in" enough to be a part of the "out-crowd." Now I can laugh about it but 40 years ago I couldn't. I was just me and while I wanted to be accepted for who I was, I really didn't feel I was.

Now, I don't know what kind of teenage experience you had – whether you were part of the in-crowd or not – but I suspect that all of us here today can at least understand, if not identify, with those feelings of wanting to be "in" and yet feeling left "out." I would also suspect that all of us, at one time or another, have probably felt that way because we human beings are notorious at excluding others. Let me give you an example. I once pastored a congregation in Auburn, California. There were two "exclusive" housing developments in that town – the kind with gates. And since I had never lived in such a development, I asked a member of the congregation who lived in one of the two, what he liked best about living there. Without hesitation he said that what he liked best about living there was the fact that only "certain" people could get in and the "rest" were kept out – and then he went on to characterize the "rest" as being those who he deemed to be less than "the cream of the crop."

Now, I'm sure that's not the way all people who live in gated communities feel but that's sure the way this one man felt. Kinda sad! And, frankly, in a way I think it's the way many others in our world feel -- more ready to exclude than to include. We exclude on the basis of race or creed or color or economic status or age or weight or looks or whatever. We find a difference and we use it to exclude those who are not like us.

It's bad enough when this kind of thing happens in the world but somehow it seems twice as bad when it happens in the church. And, believe me, it does. A colleague once told me how his home congregation in Chicago, once had a special meeting years ago to discuss and decide whether they should let African-Americans join the congregation since they never had before.

Thank God, the decision was positive but the very fact that they even had to discuss it, let alone decide anything, speaks volumes.

Of course, our tendency to exclude rather than to include is nothing new even for the church. It even happened with Jesus' first disciples as it's recorded in today's Gospel lesson. "Jesus, we saw this man, this stranger, doing wonderful things in your name but he wasn't one of us, he wasn't one of the "in-crowd", and so we told him to stop." "Don't stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever isn't against us is for us." You see, Jesus' disciples were thinking "exclusively" but Jesus was thinking "inclusively."

For while it may be man's nature to exclude, it's God's nature to include. We see that most clearly in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus came for the very purpose of being the means by which ALL people might be included in the family of God. He lived and ministered among those who were literally members of the "out-crowd" to prove that point and he suffered and died so that they and all people might have forgiveness, life and salvation. Everything he said and did throughout his life and ministry, especially through his death and resurrection, speaks directly to his desire to include everyone in God's kingdom and to exclude no one.

And so it ought to be for his people as well – including everyone and excluding no one. As it's been said, the church is the only organization on earth that was founded and continues to exist specifically for those who are not yet members of it. You see, God created the church to be the venue through which the Gospel of Jesus Christ might be preached and taught and shared and lived throughout the world. And yet, many times the church is tempted to act just like the world – acting more like an exclusive club that's open only to a few rather than an inclusive one that's open to all. It's not that we try to keep people out it's just that we tend to keep the Good News to ourselves and never really share it with others outside the church. God created the church to be the very model to the world of what it means to be included – to show the world that in and through Christ it is possible for all people to be as one.

It continues to be my hope and prayer that God may give us the desire and the power to include rather than exclude – that we might affirm God's intention in our own life and in the life of this congregation and throughout the church to reach out to those outside the church as well as to those within with the love of God in Christ Jesus. May God bless us to that end for Jesus' sake. Amen.