

“Who Is for Us?”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 30, 2018
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Mark 9:38-50 (NRSV)

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

⁴² “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹ “For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

“If we ever get confused or disappointed or upset about who is on our side, remember that the first disciples got similarly upended, and had to learn the hard way that ministry and relationships and being a healing community isn’t about God being on our side – it is about being on the side of God.” --J B-C

Sermon

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For truly I tell you,
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 because you bear the name of Christ
 will by no means lose the reward.” --Mark 9: 38-41

On the way home from the animal hospital,
 our dog Bryan was restless.
Bryan jumped down from the backseat,
 preferring to hunker down low, in the well between the seats.
Then he changed his mind and climbed back up onto the bench
 to sniff the air coming in the open window.
He acted as if the shaved area on top of his head was no big deal,
 that if he could handle the aftermath of surgery to remove an inner growth,
 that he could handle anything.

I could see the 85-pound Black Labrador face in the rearview mirror.
Bryan has the most expressive, big brown eyes.

Sometimes when we are in the family den he acts a little puppy,
 bounding from person to person, checking in, offering free wet kisses,
 tail wagging so wildly he clears the coffee table and tv trays.

As I drove I sneaked glances to the mirror
 to peek at the row of stitches on top of his head.
“How are you feeling?” I asked.
“Thanks for asking. I’ve been better,” said Bryan.
 “Kind of sore, but mostly I’m relieved I didn’t have to wear the cone of shame.”
“I hear that. We bought you a special cone at PetSmart,
 made of cloth with clear plastic windows.
The other day, I put on the cone to show you it wasn’t so bad and took a Selfie.
 But seriously, even fancy cones are hard to bear.”
“Yeah, back in the recovery room,” said Bryan,
 “all of us coming out of surgery were comparing notes.
 No one wants to be embarrassed.”

I signaled to change lanes. “So, who else was in the recovery room?”
“Oh, our vets and techs were busy today,” he said.

“When I woke up after surgery,
I was on a nice blanket in a big kennel on a countertop,
right next to a birdcage, a terrarium, and a fishbowl.”
“Amazing. What—or who--was in the birdcage?”
“A bird.”
“Yeah, I guessed that part. Did you find out why it was there?”
Bryan wagged his tale, thumping it against the passenger door.
He told me the bird’s story.
Her name is Dee Aconette.
Dee Aconette lived in Poland and was a lifelong companion of a nurse.
Her friend nursed and healed neighbors across the city,
making house calls, delivering babies,
binding wounds and being a healing presence.
When she died the funeral home was packed.
It seemed like the whole city was on hand,
listening to the cantor, singing the psalms, focused on the rabbi’s laments.
Perched on a windowsill, the bird wept.
Then came the procession to the cemetery.
Dee Aconette flew ahead, showing the way.
When they arrived at the cemetery, there was some confusion.
The procession stopped at the closed gate.
A graveyard sign proclaimed it a Christian cemetery.
No Jews, Muslims, or non-Christians allowed.
Dee Aconette chirped, “Who is for us? Whoever is not against us is for us!
Who is for us? Nurse was for us!
Who is for US? Nurse was for US!”
“And we shall be for our nurse!” shouted back the mourners.
The bird offered encouragement from a tree branch
as a team of neighbors
took shovels and dug a grave just outside the fence.
Everyone else --patients, hospital staff, friends, rabbis, and priests—
tore down the cemetery fence,
took down the offending sign,
turned up the volume of the rhetoric of love.
And when they were done, they paused for a moment of silence,
a silence broken when Dee Aconette let loose her song of joy
backed by a chorus of heavenly angels offering the descant.

“Wow, Bryan, what a story. So, why was she in the animal hospital?”
“Exhaustion,” said Bryan.
“If you flew from Poland to Atlanta, your arms would be tired, too.”

Traffic slowed for a school zone.
I snuck a peek at the backseat. “Who—or what--was in the terrarium?”

Bryan's opened his mouth in a wide grin.
Some drool decorated the dog towels Betty had spread to protect the seat.

"Have you ever talked with an armadillo? What a hoot.
He called himself Elder Dillo.
He told me a joke. Want to hear his joke?"
I didn't feel like I had a choice. Go ahead.
"Why did the armadillo cross the road?
To prove to the chicken it could be done."

"Bryan, did Elder Dillo have anything else to say?"
"Sure. He told me his story."

He was born and raised in the Sonoran Desert in southwestern Arizona.
But Elder wearied of wandering around, wanting, watching,
waiting for something to happen,
waiting for rain,
waiting for a sense of purpose.

He said to himself,
"Self, you are an aimless armadillo...a wandering Armenian was my—"
Suddenly a sagebrush blew toward him with sheets of paper stuck in the leaves.
Elder grabbed the papers, discovering they'd been torn from the New Testament.
He read that Jesus said to John, "Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink
because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

The Word resonated in his soul.
He began to take notice of people driving into the desert on purpose,
driving with purpose,
driving pick-ups and SUVs with water tanks,
filling up water stations,
leaving gallon jugs of water and cans of food
for any wayward traveler who might be thirsty,
who might need a cup of water to live.

Elder did not see any outer, outward, or obvious signs
that these drivers, these servants
hailed from any particular faith or religion or denomination.

Some may have borne the name of Christ; some may not;
they shared in common, however, God-given graciousness and generosity.

They cared less for borders or marked territory
and more for saving souls and building bridges of relationships.

Elder enlisted.

Saving humans became his purpose.

When someone wandered, lost, searching for hope in the Sonoran Desert,
he scuttled over and lead them to the water stations.

Well, added Bryan, lead isn't the word he used

'cause you folks move a lot faster than armadillos.
He pointed, like a hound dog, in the direction they should go.
Highly effective, he said. Worked every time.

I wondered aloud how an armadillo came to be here, in Atlanta, in a terrarium.
Bryan shared that Elder Dillo said some disciples of Jesus
thought Elder was crazy or a competitor or contrary to Christ.
Elder got picked up by a Christian social worker,
detained by a Christian police officer,
evaluated by a Christian psychiatrist,
and sentenced by a Christian judge.

True story.

Our vet had read the same passage in the Bible, interpreting it holistically.
So, she took him in, to save him, kind of like giving him a cup of cold water."

"Bryan, you meet the most interesting folks.

And the fishbowl?"

"Darnedest thing," he said.

"Evangeline. Evangeline Lilly Pad. That's the fish's name."

"Okay, you got me," I said.

"How in the world did she tell you her name? Fish can talk?"

"No, silly. She uses a dry erase board. She writes really, really fast.

I read even faster before the letters washed away."

I nodded. "Good thing you took the Evelyn Woodhead Sped Reading Course."

"Good thing," said Bryan.

We merged onto Lawrenceville Highway.

Traffic was cruising along at a steady clip.

"I imagine she has one, so what's the fish's story?

Is it about the one that got away?"

Evangeline Lilly Pad was swept up by Hurricane Florence.

Wind and waves forced her out of her comfort zone, pushing her upstream.

She found herself caught in the murky water of the Cape Fear River,

swimming upstream deep into eastern North Carolina,

barely able to breathe.

She had a front row view of emergency crews and rescue workers.

She saw folks going out of their way to help neighbors in need.

Boats for cruising and sunbathing were used to rescue families and pets and strangers.

When it came to restoring communities and resurrecting lives,

Evangeline didn't need a weatherman to tell her which way the wind blows.

Fish know a thing or two, she said, about healing a body of souls.

Fish live and travel in schools, in a draft, a nest, an army of herring, a hover of trout.

When one mourns, they all mourn.

When one rejoices, the joy is shared.
Communities can heal.
Evangeline said that communal restoration takes prayer, patience, practice.
We move forward by embodying compassion, sharing stories, engaging authentically.
At our worst,
 God's creations can be cruel or indifferent or spiteful.
The human race is at its best
 when differences are put aside and we unite to serve.
God's creations shine when what matters the least
 is who gets the credit or the spotlight or the reward,
 and what matters most is who shares in the dance.

I wondered how Evangeline got to Atlanta.
 Did she swim from the Cape Fear River to the Chattahoochee?
"Don't be silly," said Bryan.
 "Our vet was there, helping pets stranded by Florence.
 Then Evangeline rescued the vet."

As we pulled into our neighborhood
 Bryan wagged and whimpered with happiness,
 smells and scents suddenly familiar.
He said, "You know, James, most every day I overhear you
 offer pastoral care on the phone and practice preaching and so forth.
Now that we're talking canine to human, I have to tell you:
 your inflection is all wrong.
When Jesus says whoever is not against us is for us,
 your emphasis needs to be on us, as in all of us.
No sides; just one side, God's side.
Who is for US.
God is for all of us; we're called to be, too.
In other words, my friend,
 blest be the tie that binds."

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!