
“Who’s mission is it, anyway?”

A SERMON on Mark 9:38-50 for the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
Preached 26 September 2021 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister¹
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Back a little over 10 years ago now, when I first started at my previous church, the one I served in Connecticut, I introduced a new practice in worship. At the passing of the peace, rather than simply launching directly into everyone starting to shake hands and greet one another, I started having worship leader first say to the congregation, “The Peace of Christ with you all,” and having the congregation respond, “And also with you.”

Now, the observant among you may note that this is exactly what we do every Sunday here at Cloverdale United Church, and I suspect that you have never given it very much thought, because why would you? It seems like a small and innocuous change. After all, I wasn’t actually starting up the passing of the peace itself being a part of the worship service—they’d already been doing that, for many years. It was just adding the little dialogue between the worship leader and the congregation—sure seemed like a small change to me. And indeed, for many in that church, it was. However, for a small few of our more “stalwart” members—by which, of course, I mean “members who are stubbornly resistant to change”—this was the cause of *much* consternation. In due course, I was informed by these few members that this new practice had *no place* in *their* church(!)... because it was, “*too Catholic.*”

This accusation may leave you scratching your head, because this way of passing the Peace in worship is not uniquely, or even particularly, Catholic. But if you have ever spent time with Congregationalists in the New England region, or really any number of other Protestant traditions on various locations, then perhaps you will know that the label, “too Catholic,” often is simply shorthand for, “I don’t like this thing.” It does not matter if the thing in question actually *is* Catholic.

Coming forward to receive Communion at the front of the church? Too Catholic. The pastor wearing a clergy collar? Too Catholic. Saying a Creed or Confession in worship? Too Catholic. The clergy being involved in the congregation’s budget process? Too Catholic. That new hymn on Sunday morning that you didn’t like? It was probably too Catholic, too.

A good friend of mine, a UCC clergy colleague with whom both Adam and I had overlapped in seminary and who ended up briefly serving a congregation just two towns over from the one I served in Connecticut, she once related just such one of these stories one evening as she and Adam and I shared dinner together. She had introduced singing a hymn into a new place in the service, as a sung response after the sermon. Within a week or two, a stalwart member of that congregation pulled her aside to share that this new thing was too Catholic.

“But it is not at all Catholic!” Adam exclaimed in exasperation as Nicolette finished her story. And, indeed, it is not. Like in Adam’s Anglican tradition, in the order for Mass in the Roman

¹ This sermon incorporates some material originally composed by my spouse, the Rev. Adam Yates, for a sermon preached by him at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, East Haddam, Connecticut, USA, on 30 September 2018; used by permission.

Catholic tradition, what follows the sermon is the recitation of the Creed. There's never a hymn anywhere near that point in the service.

"More to the point..." our friend Nicolette interjected, "So what if it is?"

While Adam had been caught up in the technicality of whether it was Catholic or not—as had I, truth been told—she had gone straight for the heart of the matter. Why did the people in her congregation, like some of those in my congregation, equate things that are Catholic with being wrong, or bad, or undesirable? Why are we so quick to use the Catholic tradition as the whipping boy or straw man in our own sense of religious rightness?

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"Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

John, one of Jesus' more stalwart disciples, was incensed to find this person doing ministry in Jesus' name, for he was not part of John's group of Jesus' followers. He was not part of their group and was outside their control. He was outside their group and could not be trusted to do this work right. He could not be trusted because, no doubt, his style of exorcism was probably "too Catholic."

I suppose that there is some comfort—strange comfort, but comfort nonetheless—in the knowledge that after two thousand years, we are still making the same mistakes that the first disciples made. "Teacher, we heard someone proclaiming the Good News in your name, and we did not listen to them, we did not invite them in, we drove them away because they were too Catholic, they were too Protestant, they were too Evangelical, they were too charismatic, they were not Bible-based enough, they were not justice-minded enough, they had not yet been saved."

Jesus' response, which is the Biblical equivalent of "What the heck is wrong with you?" is as radical to us now as it was to John and the other befuddled disciples. For anyone who ministers in the name of Jesus cannot be against Christ, and anyone who is not against Christ is for him. Even if they minister in ways we would not, using traditions we find foreign and strange, and doing things differently than we do them, if they accomplish anything in Christ's name, it is because Christ is with them. Even as Christ is with us.

As radical as that message was to the disciples, as radical as it is still to us today, there is a part of this story that is even more radical yet. It is the revelation that Jesus had other followers. What was more shocking to John and his fellow disciples than finding another person doing works of power in Jesus' name, was realizing that they were not the only followers of Jesus.

John and his fellow disciples were not the only loci of God's work in the world. You, me, and all of us together today are not the centre of Jesus' work in the world. Now, I know that this sounds obvious, but let it sink in for a moment.

Jesus has other followers not known to us, and we here at Cloverdale United are not the centre of God's work in the world. Jesus has other followers not known to us, and we who are a part of this thing we call The United Church of Canada, or the broader Reformed tradition, or the even broader Protestant tradition are not the centre of God's work in the world. Jesus has other

followers not known to us, and even all of us that dare to call ourselves Christian are not the only loci of God's work in the world. God is so much bigger than us, bigger than this church, bigger than our denomination, and bigger even than the whole Christian tradition. God is bigger than we can possibly imagine. What is more, God is at work in the world in ways we have not imagined. And God is accomplishing this work through people we do not expect.

God's work, Christ's ministry, is accomplished through Christians *like us*—yes, absolutely. And God's work is accomplished through Christians *not* like us. And God's work is done through our Jewish and Muslim and Sikh and Hindu and Buddhist and Bahai sisters and brothers. And God's work is realized through people who have no faith or were never introduced to the faith. And Christ's ministry is accomplished by the incarcerated and the homeless. And Christ's Good News is proclaimed on the tongues of immigrants and refugees, even when we do not understand the words that they speak. And God's vision of the new creation is shared in the dreams of the orphan and the elderly waiting forgotten in the nursing home alike.

Jesus has other followers not known to us. If we, like John, labour under the pretence that we alone have a corner on Jesus' ministry—that this thing we are engaged in together is ultimately *our* mission rather than *his* mission in which we are invited to join in—then we will find ourselves in the position of working against God's work in the world. Then truly it would be better if we had a millstone hung around our neck and were thrown into the sea.

But Jesus does not want that. God does not desire that. Better yet, we should be humble. We should approach the world with an attitude of humility and the expectation that we *will* find God *already* at work around every corner and in every person we meet.

When we do this, we will discover all the great multitude who share in our claim on Christ. We will discover all the many and varied ways God works in our world, through people who do not look like us, who do not believe like us, or who do not speak like us. We will see the ways Christ's ministry is worked in Evangelicals and Baptists, through Catholics and Orthodox, through Anglicans and Lutherans and Presbyterians, and yes, even through United Church-ers like us.

Blessing and honour, glory and power, be unto God, now and forever. Amen.