

“A Cup of Water”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
September 27, 2015 Ordinary 26B

Esther 7:1-6

Mark 9:38-50

I want to thank Linda McGarry for decorating our sanctuary this morning with flags from different countries around the world, in honor of the International Day of Peace, which many people observed last Monday. With all the turmoil in Syria and the Middle East, and in many other parts of the world, we need to come together with all different people throughout the world to pray and to work for peace.

Many of us Protestant Christians have been following the Pope's activities and speeches this week with delight. He has been careful to speak not just to Catholics, but to people of all backgrounds of faith and non-faith. And on Friday he called together hundreds of religious leaders from all the world's religions to pray for peace at the National September 11 Memorial. The Moderator and Executive of the Presbytery of New York City were also invited. I wish I had been invited. I guess I moderated the wrong Presbytery at the wrong time! But I'm happy to have retired from that job.

It's not a simple matter to get people of different religions to pray together. I remember years ago at our Leonia clergy association, the Rabbi from the Sons of Israel synagogue rebuked us for wanting to pray together at a meeting. She believed it was helpful to meet and talk together, but she didn't see any common ground for praying. No one argued with her. We just stopped praying together.

One of the Bishops who helped organize Friday's prayer service admitted that praying with people of different faiths is a sensitive matter. How do you pray with others in a way that respects individual religious identity? He explained it this way: we're not actually "praying together, but (we're) being in the presence of the other praying...(with) great respect and great appreciation for the other."* I would call that praying together. But whatever you call it, it was an extraordinary event.

This was not the first time a Pope met with religious leaders from other faith traditions. But past Popes focused on questions of doctrine, rather than trying to make friends and identify shared goals. At the Memorial Pope Francis said, "For all our differences and disagreements, we can live in a world of peace. In opposing every attempt to create a rigid uniformity, we can and must build based on respect for diversity of language, culture and religion, and lift our voices against everything which would stand in the way of such unity."* In other words, stop trying to make everyone the same, and respect our differences. That's the beginning of peace.

And it sounds a lot like what Jesus was trying to do in the story Venge read from Mark this morning. The disciples were complaining to Jesus, because someone they didn't know was using Jesus' name to cast out demons. They tried to stop him because

he wasn't part of their group. But Jesus answered, "Don't stop him... Whoever is not against us is for us."

Now, Jesus did say just the opposite of this in another gospel. In Matthew (12:30) he said, "Whoever is not with me is against me." But in Matthew, it was a totally different context. The religious leaders had been arguing with Jesus over everything they could think of. They deliberately told lies about him, accusing Jesus of using power from the devil. So Jesus called them on it and challenged their lies. Those who knowingly disregard or twist the truth, ARE against Jesus. In fact he said they were blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. And there *are* people in this world today who do disregard the truth, bullies who will do anything to get their own way. But for people of good will, for those who want to do good, Jesus said "whoever is not against us is for us." We are to celebrate any contributions people make to God's kingdom.

And then Jesus went on to talk about how to avoid hell. Many religious leaders back then believed faith was about keeping the rules, avoiding temptation, sin, and punishment from God. And they were so serious about it, that they separated themselves from others and condemned those who didn't believe and behave the same as they did. It sounds like a lot of religious people today, whether they are Christian, Muslim or Jewish.

But for Jesus, God's Kingdom was about generosity, grace and love. And to make the point, he offered two scenarios.** On the one hand, if anyone offered even a cup of water to someone who does God's will, he or she would be rewarded in heaven. But then he went on to say, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones... it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 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."

The first scenario is about being generous, recognizing a need and offering a small act of kindness, a cup of water. The second scenario is about avoiding punishment, or hell. And you do that by eliminating any and all temptations to sin. Whatever causes temptation to sin, whether it be a hand or food or eye, you just cut it off; get rid of it.

Now of course we're not supposed to take either of these scenarios literally. *One* cup of water saves you? *One* sin condemns you to hell? But Jesus offered these ridiculous scenarios to show us it's useless to try to be right and avoid punishment. According to Jesus, those who seek to be right end up crippled and blind. But it doesn't take much to support the work of God with generosity. No miracles. No jumping through fire. Just a cup of water. That's it. Which do you choose? Being right, or being generous? Or as another pastor put it,** should we hack away at what is sinful, or offer water to a world thirsty for healing, for grace, for generosity?

The answer should be obvious. But not everyone gets it. I read an article yesterday*** about a gathering of people in South Carolina who are angry and anxious about refugees settling in their small town. They say they are afraid of Muslim

extremists who they are sure will disrupt their way of life, even though most of the 32 people who have already been placed in the area are Christian and not even Syrian. Still, one woman said, we are not a Muslim nation and we can't co-exist with Muslims. Another man questioned whether the refugees could be sent back to their home country. When he was told they could not, he became frustrated and asked, so, do we shoot them? The people responded with laughter and applause.

That's one reaction – fear and distrust and rejection of people who are different, even families of the same religion in desperate need. But others, including pastors and church members, are responding with generosity and grace, welcoming newcomers into their communities, offering a cup of water, a sign of welcome, a helping hand. Differences don't have to be bad. People who are new and different often add energy and color to our lives and neighborhoods. Our church has certainly been enriched by people from different language and culture groups.

Later in the service Michael and Barbara will give a Minute for Mission about the refugee crisis in Europe. How will we respond as a nation? How will we respond as a church? How will we respond as individuals? What is the cup of water we can offer to these little ones who hunger and thirst for a safe place to rest their weary heads?

Chapter 9 of Mark ends with Jesus saying, "Be at peace with one another." Peace starts by respecting differences, and resisting the pressure to make people all be the same. We know that well here. This is a diverse congregation. We have at least ten nationalities represented here. And we are diverse theologically. There are people here who are not sure about choosing Jesus, who are not against Jesus, but are not quite ready to be for him and his ways either. And that's OK. As Jesus said, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Every little contribution to God's kingdom counts, no matter where it comes from. Even non-religious gestures of support, like offering a cup of water to a thirsty person, shows which side you're on. And if you do a good deed in Jesus' name, you will not lose your reward.

So may we be at peace in this community, and unite with people of good will throughout the world to work for God's Kingdom with compassion, generosity and love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

* Goodstein, Laurie, "In a Void Created By Religious Violence, Leaders Share Prayers for Peace." The New York Times, September 26, 2015, page A17.

** credit to David R. Henson, "The Way of Cold Water: A Homily on the Hyperbole of Heaven and Hell (Mark 9:38-50)." September 23, 2015 at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/davidhenson/2015>.

*** Fausset, Richard, "Fear Arrives in South Carolina Long Before Any Actual Syrians," The New York Times, September 26, 2015, page A1.