

Mark 9:38 "Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

³⁹ "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

⁴² "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.

Dear Friends In Christ,

WHY SO MANY CHURCHES?

So how many churches did you drive past this morning? Depends on which way I come to church, but on 31W I can think of at least six churches. Faith makes seven. If you're coming from Rineyville or E-town you went by a lot more. Why are there so many churches?

And when you read the church signs you find out they are not just different franchises of the same company. There are Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, Korean. Why so many churches?

What do you think outsiders, non-church-goers, think of all those churches? Probably confusing. Or maybe they think it is more like restaurants: just different flavors. Or maybe it is someone who has spent time in a couple churches and thinks it is all a tempest in a teapot, mountains out of molehills. A small number of people get all prickly their particular view of the Bible and have to start their own church. Why so many churches?

We Christians are concerned about it. We don't really enjoy the fact that there are so many churches. Especially in an age becoming more antagonistic toward Christians, would it not be better for us all to work together and all be unified? Why so many churches?

Jesus was concerned about it. I don't know all that Jesus had in mind when he prayed these words—which were not part of our reading. On the night Jesus was betrayed he prayed, *"I pray for those who will believe in me... that all of them may be one... May they be brought to complete unity."* (John 17:20-23) Jesus really didn't want it to be this way. Why so many churches?

I. Every Church that Proclaims Jesus Is a Christian Church

And it was troubling the disciple John in our reading. Now in our reading, he is telling Jesus about something that happened, apparently when they were not with Jesus. Maybe Jesus had been off praying by himself like he sometimes did, or maybe this was on their short internship back in Mark chapter 6. John, at the time of our reading, remembered something that happened a while back and he had to talk to Jesus. *"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."* (38).

You see, I think John had the same thought about church. "Jesus, I wasn't real sure what to do, but we can't have all these people running around in your name, can we? We need to be strong and unified. We can't have lots of churches, can we?"

I think John wanted all of Jesus' followers to be united behind Jesus. And so when he saw this guy doing some things and claiming to do this in Jesus' name, but part of their group of Jesus followers, well he didn't want the movement to end in confusion, all scattered like a feathers shot out of a cannon.

He wanted containment. Keep the forces in order, moving in formation, strength in numbers, and all that. I can appreciate that.

Which is probably why Jesus reacted so mildly to John. You know, when the disciples did something really—well, I don't know quite how to say it—but when the disciples did something really stupid, Jesus could have some choice words for them. Remember the “Get behind me, Satan!” spoken to one of his disciples? And several times he looked right at his group of disciples and said, “You of little faith.” But not here.

When John told that man to stop teaching in Jesus' name—in essence to stop setting up another church two blocks down the street—Jesus told John, “Don't stop him!” No wonder we have so many churches. It started early!

Well, let Jesus explain. He went on, **“No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me.”** Jesus points out the most important thing and it's not the miracle part, it's the **“in my name”** part. *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”* (Romans 10:13). Heaven isn't just for Lutherans. This is why we respect Christians from other churches as Christians. Jesus has good things to say about *all* who are **“in [his] name.”**

Which leaves us with more questions than we had at the start! Because if Jesus is saying, “Even if that guy isn't with us, just let him be” then we begin to wonder: Should churches make divisions between themselves and other churches? Can't we all just say we are “Christian”? Why are there so many churches?

Paul in the second reading, was faced with the fact that some people were preaching Christ for the wrong reasons. He said, *“It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry... The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached”* (Php. 1:15,18).

Jesus and Paul had the same attitude. They don't condone the wrong things – Paul the wrong motives, Jesus the separatist – but each rejoices that Jesus' name is preached.

Jesus continues that line of thinking when he says, **“I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward”** (Mark 9:41). A simple glass of water offered in Christ's name is pleasing to God. Those kids putting 25 cents into envelope this morning because they want to thank Jesus, will be rewarded by God. That encouraging word you offer in Christ's name, that is pleasing in heaven. Even the weakest work of the weakest Christian trusting in Jesus' name is precious in God's sight.

II. A Church Must Guard against Sin

Which is so sunshine and roses that we must be wondering, “Ok. If God will reward all that is done in Jesus' name, why so many churches?” Shouldn't we all get together and blot out the denominational differences? Isn't it offensive, confusing, nonsensical to non-Christians that there are so many churches? Wouldn't it be better to present a united front, a unified message? If Jesus was so tolerant, shouldn't we be?” I can understand the reasons people say that. But listen to Jesus. Don't just listen to the parts of Jesus that you like to hear, that agree with your personal philosophy on life.

No sooner does Jesus tell John to let other Jesus-preachers continue than he says, **“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.”** (42). It sounds almost schizophrenic. Jesus preaches tolerance to his disciples, then suddenly tolerant Jesus becomes intolerant Jesus.

We once had a president in the United States who cut out, literally, the parts of the Bible he did not like. He went in there with a scissors and just cut. I think that is what people in our tolerant age would do here. The first part of our reading they would love. “See! Look at how tolerant Jesus is.” And then they would go and cut out verses 42 to 50, because that, is simply too judgmental.

Indeed, the two parts do sound almost like opposites. Let that one guy preach all he wants, but

cement shoes for the other. How can Jesus be so tolerant, then so intolerant?

In the first part, Jesus was focusing on how powerful faith in Jesus is; it saves. In the second part, Jesus is talking about how dangerous sin is.

A couple months ago our family went to eastern Kentucky. One sweltering afternoon some of us went swimming in Laurel River Lake. We were almost right next to the dam where the lake is the deepest – supposedly over 250 feet deep. Now treading water in two hundred feet of water shouldn't be any different from an eight foot swimming pool, but at least for me it was. Just thinking how deep the water below me was gave me a shiver. Imagine the expectation of sitting on a large raft with a five hundred pound rock tied to your neck. The other people are hefting the rock over the side. Imagine your panic! Jesus says that we should be more afraid of teaching a child to sin in any little way than have that stone around our neck.

Ever seen adults teaching kids how to cuss, and thinking it is cute? ***“If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better...”*** Ever seen parents who through their lifestyle teach children to have a short temper, to be lazy, wasteful, ungrateful, disrespectful, dishonest, not attend church? Children's eyes are watching and learning and mirroring and repeating. Every parent must ask God's forgiveness. How much sin our children have learned from us!

Jesus doesn't stop there. ***“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell.... And if your foot causes you to sin... And if your eye causes you to sin.”*** The unquenchable fires of hell are not just for people who shoot up community colleges. God's punishment is for every person who sins by hand, or foot, or eye – yes, even the look that could kill, the lustful stare, the jealous longing. All of that is sin, and Jesus says that cutting off a foot (remember they didn't have anesthesia in those days) is a small thing compared to the punishment that God ought to pour out on each and every sin.

That is why there are so many churches. What? That is why there are so many churches. Because Christians over the centuries have taken Jesus' words seriously. If I see something in a church that I firmly believe is against God's Word, then I will tell people, warn them, try to get them to change. But finally, if I believe that God's Word says something plainly different from what my church does, and if I take Jesus' word seriously, then I simply can't continue. And so it is that over the centuries hundreds of denominations have been formed. That's why there are so many churches.

Perhaps the reason we don't appreciate this is because we are privileged children. I'm not throwing stones here, but a privileged child often has blindspots. A child who has grown up with the best education, food, clothing, family cars, and devices often has blindspots. They take some blessings for granted. Dear fellow Christians, we are privileged children of God, and we have blindspots. You see, even if you have never attended a private school, never had enough money to make an extra house payment, we are privileged. We know that Jesus has forgiven our sins. We know that no sin is too big a sin to be forgiven. And sometimes, like privileged children, because our sins are so wonderfully and graciously and daily forgiven in Jesus Christ, we forget how dangerous sin is. We often do not take sin as seriously as we should.

But when we do take God's word seriously, we understand that there are points where toleration is not what Jesus wants within his church. There come times when we must insist that what God says is the way things are.

And so now, Jesus looks back at John. John had asked, “Was it good that we stopped that guy who wasn't with us.” I think there were two things Jesus wanted John to take away:

- 1) I need to stop being so concerned about the other guy, and be thankful for whenever and wherever Jesus' name is proclaimed.
- 2) I need to watch out for sin in my life, so that I may continue to be sure of eternal life with my savior. Amen.