

Proper 21, Year B

[Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29](#)

[Psalm 19:7-14](#)

[James 5:13-20](#)

[Mark 9:38-50](#)

Common Ground, Common Good

Did you all hear that the Pope is in the United States this week? It's true! As you're certainly well-aware, it's been a Francis frenzy! One cannot go anywhere without seeing Pope Francis on TV or online, or hearing about him on the radio. Millions of people have flocked to see him in New York, Washington DC, and Philadelphia. I've even seen cartoons holding out hope that the Pope might make an emergency stop in New Orleans to pray over Drew Brees' shoulder. Alas, I think only a miracle performed by our Lord himself may help our beloved Saints going forward. Yes, Francis is here, and he's definitely got the world's attention.

This is not just an important moment for the Roman Catholic Church. It's an important moment for all people of faith, Episcopalians, too. While it's true that we are reformed catholics, and that we do not recognize papal authority within our Church, we all care about what the Pope has to say as a Christian leader. Now, whether we always agree with the pope or not is another story; but like it or not he's a moral leader, a spokesperson for Christianity the world over, and his words and example have an impact. He may not have canonical authority over Anglicans—meaning the authority granted by Church law—but he certainly has spiritual authority. And we should be glad of that!

Last week when we celebrated Holy Baptism we renewed our Baptismal Covenant. One of the questions is, "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?" That is the very thing we watched happen all week: the Pope

proclaimed the Good News of God in Christ by word and example to our leaders, to the people of our country and beyond, and to us. Who could not be moved by the five year-old immigrant girl who broke through the crowd, and whom the Pope directed security to let through, recalling for us Jesus' words, "Let the little children come to me." Who could not admire the Pope turning down a meal with Boehner, Pelosi, and Reid, instead choosing to dine with the homeless, recalling for us Jesus' preference for the poor above the elite. Who could not relate to the meme I saw on Facebook, a picture of the Pope speaking before Congress with the caption, "Pope Francis visits the sick."

Yes, we all love this Pope. But that doesn't mean that we're all ready to get up and walk across the street to St. Dominic's, love our sisters as brothers there as we may. I, for one, love The Episcopal Church and our Anglican tradition, and though I admire the Pope and our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters greatly, I find that The Episcopal Church is where I belong in my relationship with God. Yet, it is in our love for our respective traditions, and in our love for being with those like us, where we all have to be careful. We may love our own, but we mustn't ever think we've got the corner on the whole gospel truth, and that others, both inside or outside of the Church, don't have something to teach us.

This is the lesson the disciples learn in this morning's gospel reading. Fresh off of being put in their place by Jesus over arguing about who is the greatest, what do they do? "Well," it seems they say, "maybe one of us individually can't be the greatest, but we can be a part of the greatest group!" "Teacher," they say to Jesus, "we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Oh, boy. The disciples must have really driven Jesus crazy sometimes. This is one of the

things I love about the Gospel of Mark. As Bishop Gray has taught those of you taking his study of Mark, Mark's disciples rarely get it right. It's usually women and outsiders who do. In Mark the disciples are always bumbling idiots. Matthew and Luke, who most scholars believe used Mark as their primary source material, tend to sanitize some of these stories. Mark tells it like it was. The disciples, just as modern-day disciples like you and me, can really botch things up when left to their own devices.

Jesus tells the disciples, "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. Whoever is not against us is for us. 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." Whoever is not against us is for us. When Pope Francis proclaims by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, and when he reminds our politicians that their job is to love their neighbors, strive for justice, and respect the dignity of every human being, then he's for every Episcopalian I know. And that's why so many are for him. We may all do things in the wider Church a little differently, but our common mission is to share the gospel.

Think about what we did as a community yesterday. We participated in the 2nd Annual Greater New Orleans CROP Hunger Walk with churches from around the city. We walked with Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and Presbyterians to raise awareness and funds for initiatives battling hunger in our community and around the world. In that couple of hours our differences in expression of the Good News of God in Christ did not matter. What mattered was helping those in need, reaching out in Jesus' name.

The Church at its best has also always taught that wherever you find good being

done, even if it's a small act like giving a thirsty person a drink of water, there you find Jesus—whether you call it Jesus or not. I read a story recently about a church in Colorado who decided as a church to spend less on Christmas gifts, and instead to partner with an organization called Charity Water, a nonreligious nonprofit that helps provide clean drinking water for people around the world. For this particular church it's been a way for them to approach their humanitarian minded, non-Christian friends in a non-threatening way, while also showing them what the Good News of God in Christ is all about. Just because Charity Water is not an expressly Christian or even religious organization does not mean that they are not doing the work of Christ. Just like we tried to do yesterday in our ecumenical effort, this church is *creating common ground through common good*.¹ That, actually, is what I think the Pope's entire message could be summed up as saying this week: despite all of our differences in this country we can create common ground through common good.

We are all different, and have many different opinions, both inside and outside of the church. And that's okay! It does not mean we cannot work together for the common good, and be *for* each other rather than against. Anglicans have always been uniquely positioned to point this out because we are both catholic and reformed. We exist with our feet in two different worlds, and have always acted as a bridge trying to reconcile what seems like irreconcilable differences. We've always taken a comprehensive approach, and been an important player in the ecumenical activities. As a group of Anglican bishops once put it, "We believe it is only through a comprehensiveness which makes it

¹ Bob Kaylor, "The Most Elite Club In The World," *Homiletics* September 2012, http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040702.

possible to hold together . . . understandings of truth which are held in separation in other churches, that [we are] able to reach out in different directions so to fulfill [Anglicanism's] special vocation as one of God's instruments for the restoration of the visible unity of [Christ's] whole church."² We are always looking for broader viewpoints and for God's active presence outside of our own understandings.

St. Augustine wrote about this gospel passage back in the fourth century before the church was ever divided. He explains,

There may be something catholic outside the [Church]. The name of Christ could exist outside the congregation of Christ, as in the case of the man casting out devils in Christ's name. There may by contrast exist pretenses within the [church], as is unquestionably the case of those "who renounce the world in words and not in deeds," and yet the pretense is not catholic. So as there may be found in the [church] something which is not catholic, so there may be found something which is catholic outside of the church.³

In other words, God's Spirit is not active only within the Church; and conversely, not all those who say "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of heaven. We must always be cautious in remembering that we human beings tend toward people who are like us, and frequently believe that our way is the only and best way. We must always be searching for common ground for the common good among those who are different from us.

Where is the work of Christ going on in your life among the people you will meet this week? How can you find common ground with them for the common good to share the Good News of God in Christ? That work doesn't have to happen in grand gestures. Jesus reminds us that even the simple act of sharing a cup of cold water with someone who is thirsty is worthy of reward.

² Mark Chapman, *Anglicanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 130.

³ Augustine, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, New Testament vol. II, *Mark*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 120.

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