

Blurred Lines and Fuzzy Edges

September 20, 2020

Luke 9:49-50

I want to tell you a joke. It was told by the comedian Emo Philips.

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

Sound familiar? As I recall my years of growing up Baptist, it seems to me that we spent a lot of time drawing lines to distinguish ourselves from other Christians. We weren't Catholics because they obeyed the Pope, baptized babies and prayed to dead people. We weren't Episcopalians because they were just wannabe Catholics, and they were what Baptists became when they wanted to drink in front of each other. We weren't Methodists because they didn't believe in once saved always saved and had bishops who moved pastors around. We weren't Pentecostals because we didn't in tongues. And on and on.

Baptists are notorious for drawing lines. We're not alone in that. By some estimates, there may be as many as 33,000 Christian denominations world-wide, separated by race, ethnicity, geography, and history but mainly by fine-line theological distinctions and idiosyncratic practices.

If it weren't for the coronavirus, there would be 33,001. The United Methodist Church was scheduled to split at its annual meeting this summer over same-sex marriage and ordination of gay clergy. But because of covid-19 the meeting was canceled, so the number of Christian denominations will remain somewhat stable for another year.

For comparison, you know how many divisions there are in American Judaism? Three. Sounds quaint, doesn't it?

The point of this sermon is: we didn't get that from Jesus. He was absolutely OK with blurred lines and fuzzy edges.

Consider the story in our brief text. The disciple John reported to Jesus that a man in a nearby town or village was casting out demons in Jesus' name.

A few words of explanation. First, it was believed that what we might call some sort of mental illness was caused by demons who possessed the individual. Healing came when the demon was expelled. Second, Jesus was known to be an exorcist. Third, he was not the only one who cast out demons, as this story shows. According to another text, the Pharisees had their own in-house exorcists (Luke 11:19). Finally, it was believed that there was power in a name.

There's a funny story in Acts (19:13-15) about seven would-be exorcists who witnessed Paul casting out a demon in Jesus' name. They decided it must all be in the name. So, they found a man possessed by an evil spirit, and pronounced solemnly, "In the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches, Come out." The demon was puzzled. It said, "Jesus I know, Paul I know. But who are you?"

A man was casting out demons in Jesus' name, and the disciples didn't know who he was. That was the problem. Evidently, they had decided that Jesus was being careless with his branding, and they had taken it on themselves to be responsible for vetting people who wanted to represent him. Who knew what the man believed about Jesus, if anything? Who knew what he was telling people? The disciples wanted Jesus to authorize them to tell the man to cease and desist until they had time to check out his references.

Jesus was the charismatic founder of the movement. Founders of movements are often strong of charisma and not so strong on organizational skills. It often falls to the next generation of leaders to get things organized. That's what John and the other disciples were doing.

I imagine that Jesus responded with a shrug: "He is doing the healing work of God's righteous kingdom. What more do you need to know? Leave the poor man alone. If he isn't against us, he must be for us." I doubt that John or the other disciples were surprised by Jesus' response. I think they walked away, shaking their heads, and saying, "We're going to have to hire a management consultant."

Jesus just wasn't into drawing sharp lines, dividing people into us and them. If anything, he was into blurring lines.

Like when he told the story of a man who was beaten, robbed and left to die in the wilderness but who was saved by – a Samaritan, a man who would never in a million years been made the hero in a good Jewish story.

Or the time that Jesus traveled to Tyre and Sidon – which in itself was noteworthy, because this was Gentile, non-believer territory. His disciples told him about a woman who asked for healing for her daughter. Jesus said that wouldn't be appropriate since he was called to serve the children of Israel, and she challenged him.

She said even the dogs are allowed to eat the crumbs that fall from the children's table. Jesus said, "You're right." And her daughter was healed. He said, "Woman, great is your faith." He said that to a card-carrying pagan. (Matthew 15:21-28)

Or the time a Roman officer asked for healing for his daughter and Jesus said to him, "I have not seen such faith in all of Israel." (Matthew 8:5-13) Again, high praise for a non-believer (narrowly defined).

The chief takeaway from these stories is that the issue for Jesus was the redemptive, restorative, reparative work of the kingdom. It didn't matter to him that the guy in the next county who was casting out demons in his name didn't have the apostolic seal of approval. The man was bringing sanity to a deeply troubled soul, and that is what mattered.

We, Jesus' followers, are called not simply to do the work of God's righteous kingdom but to celebrate and to support and cooperate with the work that is being done regardless of who is doing it.

Sometime after I retired, I got word that there was going to be a press conference outside the hall of justice downtown Winston-Salem in mid-morning. It was part of an effort to gain freedom for a man many believed had been unjustly convicted of a crime. I was baby-sitting that morning, so I put our two-year-old grandson in the stroller, and we walked eight blocks to the hall of justice.

When I arrived, I scanned the crowd, looking for a familiar face. I spotted Stewart Ellis. Stewart was a local pastor who had joined me and a couple of other ministers in officiating at a same-sex wedding – twenty years ago this month. For that act he had been tried for heresy by the Presbyterian hierarchy.

"Who's here?" I asked. "The usual suspects," he said. There was Khalid Griggs, the African American imam at the Community Mosque, a couple of the leading black activist pastors – one Baptist, one Presbyterian. Rabbi Mark Strauss-Cohn. The Unitarian pastor. The Quaker pastor. The usual suspects.

The same ones who showed up when we organized a counter demonstration to a KKK recruiting rally, also at the hall of justice. The same ones who always showed up when the work of God's righteous kingdom was being done.

The lines that under other circumstances might have separated us from one another, put us into boxes – Jew, Christian, Muslim; Baptist, Presbyterian, Unitarian, Quaker – blurred and fell away.

I like to think that Jesus would have been comfortable there.

Benediction

Nikki and I are members of a small devotional study group that meets – virtually now but earlier at First Baptist Church – at 6:45 on Tuesday mornings. Because, as you know, really good Christians get up early to pray and read the Bible. Seth Moskowitz is a faithful member of our small group. Seth is not a Baptist; he is not a Christian; he is a Jew. Last Tuesday morning, in anticipation of Rosh Hashanah, which was Friday, he offered us the lyrics to a song that is often sung in this season of the Jewish year. I offer it as our benediction. Having worshipped together, let us return to our world:

*Return again. Return to the land of your soul.
Return to who you are. Return to what you are.
Return to where you are born and reborn again.
Return again. Return to the land of your soul.*

Go in peace. Amen.