

There is an old story I have heard about a guided tour of heaven. As the guide and his group approached a certain section of heaven, the guide put his finger to his lips asking the group to be quiet. He said, "Behind that door are the Lutherans. They think they are the only people in this place." In this little story, you can take out the word Lutheran and, in its place, substitute the name of any number of denominations or sects of people who think they have the exclusive understanding and rights to the mansions of heaven. The point is, we church people tend to create categories of who is included and who is excluded, categories containing those we think are in and those we think are out. In fact, this perspective is not limited to people of faith. We see this in many facets of culture as we find ourselves labeling others, dividing people into groups of "us" and "them," categories of who is **for** us and who is **against** us.

Well, in today's gospel reading, that inner group of twelve followers called the disciples of Jesus happened to run into a situation that is very instructive for us as we think about this aspect of human nature. The disciples meet a man who was **not** in Jesus' inner circle, the circle to which **they** belonged as the twelve closest disciples. And, here it is important to remember that Jesus had just sent them out with some very clear

instructions. He had sent them on a mission to cast out evil spirits and, at least on one occasion, they simply could not do it. They were not successful. Anyway, they ran into this man who had little connection with Jesus and was successful in getting rid of evil spirits. And, even more troubling, this man who was not part of the **disciples'** inner circle was casting out evil spirits in Jesus' name! So John, one of the top twelve, speaks up and says to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn't in our group." Well, Jesus was not pleased. He responds saying, "Don't stop him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down. It's difficult when you can't succeed at doing a job, especially if someone else who is not part of your circle ends up doing it instead. But, the man is doing something good. Whoever is not against me is for me."

This did not go over well with the disciples and, truthfully, it does not go over well with us. We tend to think that whoever is not **for** us is against us. It is so much easier that way. After all, I am not like one of them. We so readily draw circles around ourselves and others so we can better distinguish **ourselves** versus all others and thereby **justify** who we are and who we are not. You know, I am not one of those Republicans or I am not one of those Democrats. I am not one of those conservatives or I am not

one of those liberals. I am not one of those Baptists or I am not one of those fundamentalists. I am not one of those Catholics and we don't do things that way. I am not one of those whom I believe is **not** saved. Oh, yes, we do draw our circles. But, we really should understand that wherever we draw that circle, Jesus is going to be standing outside the circle with a great number of people who we might well think are not for Jesus at all.

Quite frankly, at the heart of our human struggle as we live in relationship to others is our need to define ourselves as who we are **not**. And, keeping categories of "them" and "us" means we do not have to leave what is familiar and comfortable, we do not have to go to a place that is scary. I was thinking about this during the forum we held this last Thursday evening. As people from various ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds were present we had a very meaningful discussion regarding the presence of racism in current culture. I was very aware of the categories we create, the circles we draw around ourselves and others. I was very aware of the way we have been shaped by a culture in which racism is embedded within systems. I was very aware of the manner in which racism has been used to maintain the status quo in regard to privilege and power. I was very aware of the categories racism creates and how deeply rooted this problem

is within our lives, within the church and within our community. Racism goes very deep and cannot be solved by comfortably staying within the safety of the circles we create. The truth of the matter is, racism and the many problems within our culture are much more complicated than the categories we create and these problems will never be solved by a singular set of ideas. However, the starting point means going beyond our circles, moving beyond the categories of “us” and “them.” The starting point is that place where we begin entering into relationship with others.

Entering into relationship with all types of people we would consider “other” was a **constant** starting point for Jesus. When the disciples came complaining about this “other” person casting out evil spirits in Jesus’ name, Jesus said, “Don’t stop them! Whoever is not against us is for us.” You see, for Christians, the starting point is never about who we are **not**. It is all about who we **are**, and who we are is the baptized body of Christ. There is no need to justify who we are because we have been named and claimed by a God of love. We have been given a place, a status, a home within that gracious, unending, all-encompassing love of God. And, Jesus died not only for us but for the entire world. We have already been raised to new life that is not simply about us but life for the entire world. And, in that love there is no distinction, no “us” and no “them.” So, I say, “Gracious

God, bring on the others. Bring others into our lives and take us into the lives of others. Help us to let go of our fear and move beyond our self-imposed circles and categories. Move us into the lives of 'others,' unsettle our lives and unsettle our world." This will take us to places where we will feel uncomfortable and places that just might make life messier because we will have to give up our sense of control. But, it is truly the **deeper** place where we will find **all** are embraced and held in God's love.