

One for All and All for One: The Progressive, Positive, & Practical Message of Jesus
by Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins
Sunshine Cathedral, Sept. 27, 2009
Num. 11.4-6, 11-14, 16-17; Mk 9.38-41

In today's first reading from the book of Numbers, we see the Israelites reminiscing about the good old days. But they have forgotten how not good the good old days really were. They have escaped slavery and are wandering in the wilderness looking for a homeland. The journey is uncertain. It is taking far longer than anyone had anticipated. And there are difficulties along the way. And while they are facing the challenges of freedom and the search for a new life, some of them start to long for the past...when there was meat to eat, and fruit, and herbs and vegetables.

Really? You'd trade freedom for leeks, onions, garlic, and cucumbers? You'd give up your chance to find your own way for onion rings and pickles?

But that's how it works sometimes. We find ourselves unwanted, unappreciated, unaccepted, ill-treated, vilified, over-looked, abused and so we get out. We leave that abusive relationship, that dead-end job, that church that would not affirm, marry, or ordain us...but then we are responsible for our own growth and that is more difficult than being told what to do, what to say, what to think, and how to act.

And then we think, "wow...maybe that old lover wasn't SO bad. Maybe that job was OK.

Why isn't the church that welcomed me with open arms more like the one that said I was evil and worthless?"

And as I've said time and again to people who complain to me that this church isn't more like some other church, *Please don't be angry with the church that wants you for not being the church that doesn't.*

Remember in Egypt when we had free fish? Yeah, and you do remember in Egypt that we were slaves?

Manna may not be as tasty as melons, but isn't it better for us to be free than for us to be slaves eating free fish?

And so Moses was troubled. And he complains to God, "What have I done to deserve all this grumbling from the people I'm trying to help? Did I conceive them? Did I give birth to them? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms like a wet nurse carries an infant...?"

I love all that biblical, maternal imagery. Moses seems to be saying to God, "I'm not their mother, YOU ARE! You're their Mother, but I'm raising your kids and I'm over it already." And God says, "Get some help. You don't have to do all this alone...if you get some help you'll be less frustrated." Good advice for anyone who is overwhelmed. Get some help. Complaining doesn't make it better; get some help.

Well, in the Gospel reading we see Jesus telling people to accept help also. John says to Jesus, "We saw someone using your name to expel demons, and we tried to stop it since this person was not part of OUR group."

To do something in Jesus' name isn't about using his name as a magical incantation, it's about realizing the same authority that he discovered within himself. When someone heals the sick like Jesus would do, that's using the same divine authority that Jesus used. When someone touches the untouchable, loves the unlovable, comforts the afflicted *or afflicts the comfortable*, that is doing what Jesus would do, or put another way, that is confronting evils in Jesus' name.

Jesus knows there is plenty of work to be done, so rather than be prejudiced against someone for being part of another group, let's be thankful that we share the same values...let's be glad that others are also speaking truth to power, are also comforting the sick, visiting the lonely, embracing the outcast, reaching out to those who have been excluded. If they aren't against what we are trying to do, they may actually be part of what we're trying to do.

My family was a mixture of Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists with a sprinkling of Methodists. Pentecostals and Mormons would marry into the family, and I found my way to the Episcopal Church and then to MCC. But to this day, Baptists and Catholics make up the majority of the family. I remember one of the Baptist Uncles saying about one of the Catholic cousins, "I'd rather she be dead than Catholic." Can you imagine anything so vicious, so ugly, so unlike the love of Jesus?

We try to spread the progressive, positive, and practical understanding of the Gospel in as many ways as possible...and yet you would be astounded at the emails, letters, and You Tube postings telling me that I am on the road to everlasting perdition for saying that God is love and all people have sacred value. Can you imagine anything so vicious, so ugly, so unlike the love of Jesus?

Someone once even spent money on a book and the postage it took to deliver the book to me. The book said that AIDS was divine punishment on gay people for being who they are? The woefully uniformed person was apparently unaware that HIV isn't limited to gay people and that medical advances have made HIV a manageable condition for many people today. But even so, the intent to insult and intimidate was clear. Can you imagine anything so vicious, so ugly, so unlike the love of Jesus?

I heard some of the most distasteful things uttered during the 2008 US presidential campaign. Sometimes the comments were against the Republican nominee, sometimes they were racist against the Democratic nominee. Rather than debating the ideas, people resorted to demonizing the courageous public servants who offered themselves as leaders at a crucial moment in American history. Can you imagine anything so vicious, so ugly, so unlike the love of Jesus?

I know that almost everyone listening to this will agree that love and tolerance and goodwill are the ways that people of faith should model. And still we ought to recall that the progressive, positive, and practical message of Jesus reminds us that we are all one. To follow Jesus means to forgive our enemy and to love our neighbor as ourselves. To follow Jesus is to rise above our hatreds, suspicions, and prejudices. To follow Jesus is to know that people who want love and peace and hope in their lives and in the world, no matter how they package those universal values, are our sister and brothers.

We are all children of God. When women are disrespected, men must cry out with them. When those who search for God with scriptures and rituals and names other than the ones we use, we must know that grace is as true for them as it is for us. When LGBT people are demonized, we must affirm their sacred value. And when LGBT people use the rhetoric of hatred and division, we must gently remind them that we have been victimized by that very sort of language and we don't want to be guilty of treating others in ways we haven't liked being treated ourselves.

I have encountered the divine Light in heterosexuals and homosexuals, in Democrats and Republicans, Socialists and Libertarians, in North Americans, South Americans, Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders. I have encountered holiness in Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims and Jews and Humanists and Wiccans. But I am Christian. I don't always agree with people who have chosen a different path, I don't even always

agree with other Christians! But its OK to disagree, and we can disagree without demonizing the one with whom we disagree.

Jesus shared his last supper with the man who betrayed him, and used his last breath to forgive the people who were torturing him. That's who Jesus was; and as a Christian, I have decided to try to follow that very high standard. I have fallen short of that goal more times than I need to admit to you, but it remains the goal. And to be Christian, it has to remain the goal.

I don't say that the Christian way is the only way. I can only say that it is the way I have chosen, and that means that I must try to follow the way of Jesus, which is the way of seeing all people as children of God, and of knowing that we are all one. It's time to exorcise the demons of hatred and fear, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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**I acknowledge the presence of God in me!
I trust that presence to bless me.
I trust that presence to guide me.
I trust that presence to fill me with joy.
And I now see the divine presence in every life.
Amen.**