**The Power of Partnership**

**Text: Mark 9:39-40**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**March 18, 2018**

It was a marvelous idea; a great way to enhance a beautiful, old Toronto sanctuary: tear out the carpeted chancel and the old plywood underneath, put in fine hardwood, and extend the chancel out a bit into the Sanctuary. The new flooring would look beautiful, it would improve the acoustics, and the chancel would double as a stage for a community orchestra or a local theatre group. Just a wonderful, practical idea for enhancing a worship space and creating a multi-purpose community space. And the idea went *nowhere*.

You see, it was suggested by a newcomer; someone who hadn’t been a member of Northeast Christian Church for 20 or 30 or 40 years.

Six months later, one of the pillars of the church spoke-up in a meeting. She said, “I just had an idea: why don’t we tear out the carpeted chancel and the old plywood underneath, put in fine hardwood, and extend the chancel out a bit into the Sanctuary?” And everyone said, “That’s a great idea!” Within 3 months the money was raised and the project completed!

It has been said that *what* you know doesn’t matter as much as *who* you know. If you know the right folks, do the right networking and find your way into the right circles, you develop credibility and you get things done. If not, you might be viewed with suspicion.

That anonymous fellow who was casting out demons in today’s scripture: *he* was viewed with suspicion. He didn’t know *anyone*. At least, not among the disciples. And they said to each other, “Who is that guy? And what does he think he’s doing?!” And they said to Jesus, “Master, you see that dude over there? He’s using your name and casting out demons but he’s not one of us. and that’s just wrong!”

And Jesus said, “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.”

The fact that the disciples objected to this unknown exorcist is kind of laughable because it’s not as if *they* were any great shakes at casting out demons. Just a few verses earlier they were dealing with one really tough demon that they couldn’t get rid of because they hadn’t used the essential tool of prayer. I mean, these guys are still rookies. They’re trying to play in the big leagues when they should still be in “A” ball. So when this exorcist who clearly knows what he’s doing comes along, you’d think they’d pay attention; see what they can learn from the guy. Instead they said, “You’re not one of us.” And they shunned him.

When Jackie Robinson was a rookie with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, he was the only African-American on the team and the only African-American in major league baseball. Everyone else on his team was not only white, many of them were southerners; like Eddie Stanky. Robinson was a fine, upstanding Christian man. Stanky was a mean dude with a foul mouth and a horrible temper who played dirty. They were about as different as two men could be. So when the Dodgers played their first game in Philadelphia that year, and the Phillies’ manager Ben Chapman started to hurl racist insults at Robinson, no one expected Stankey to defend his embattled team mate. But if you saw the movie *42* you’ll recall the scene where Stankey used every bit of his bad temper and foul mouth to hurl insults right back at Chapman. After that, Robinson’s team mates rallied around him. Stankey and Robinson were unlikely partners in a common cause, but as Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

A few chapters later in Mark we find Jesus deep in discussion with a scribe who asks him, “What is the greatest commandment?” Usually in the gospels we see Jesus *arguing* with the scribes and the Pharisees, and especially in Matthew’s gospel you get the impression that they’re arch enemies, but when Jesus says that the two great commandments are love of God and love of neighbor, *this* scribe *agrees* with him! The scribe even makes a snide remark to the Sadducees with whom Jesus has been arguing, suggesting that Jesus and the scribe are forming something of a partnership. As Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

One thing that I’ve concluded over the years is that sometimes the Holy Spirit has a very different agenda than we have. Sometimes the Spirit rests on someone whom we don’t know. Sometimes the Spirit empowers someone who doesn’t look like us, or doesn’t agree with us, or isn’t *our* kind of person. And we’re tempted to ignore such people, or even feel threatened by them. If you don’t fit my preconceived notions of what makes for a good person, I just might overlook the good that you’re doing, or the good suggestions that you’re making. The disciples fell into that trap when they came upon the anonymous exorcist. But Jesus challenged the disciples, and he challenges us. He said, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

We have to read this story on 2 levels. First of all, there is the level of the historical Jesus and his disciples. And it would appear that on this level, Jesus is once again up against a lack of wisdom on the part of these fisherman whom he is trying to mentor. We see this over and over again in Mark’s gospel, and you have to marvel at Jesus’ patience with these guys. But you just know that some of the time when Jesus goes off to pray, he’s knocking himself in the head, saying, “Why did I ever call these clowns?!” Of course, we know as well that Jesus is planting seeds that will bear fruit after the Resurrection. And most of the time, Jesus knows this too. That’s why he maintains a partnership with these disciples.

But there’s another level to this story. And that’s the level of the early church. By the time that Mark writes down this story, there are many Christian communities scattered around the Mediterranean world. And some of those followers of Jesus were suspicious of each other. Some *believed* differently than others. Some were *structured* differently than others. Some were engaged in different *missions* than others. And of course there was the temptation to think that if your church has a different take on the gospel than mine does, you’re not a real Christian! Some of that prejudice and bias must’ve found its way into Matthew’s and Luke’s churches, and even into the leadership of those churches, because in their versions of this verse, they have Jesus saying, “Whoever is not with me is against me” (see Mt. 12:30; Lk. 11:23). They’ve reversed it. Mark’s Jesus says, “Whoever is not against us is with us,” but Matthew’s and Luke’s Jesus says, “Whoever is not with me is against me.” Mark’s Jesus extends an open-armed, invitational, benefit of the doubt to these other groups, while Matthew’s and Luke’s Jesus holds them at arm’s length with suspicion.

We always have to remember that when we’re reading each of the 4 gospels, we’re reading about Jesus and his disciples as viewed through the lens of what’s happening in and around a Christian community some 40 or 50 or 60 years later. We have no way of knowing whether Mark on the one hand or Matthew and Luke on the other are closer to what Jesus actually said. Maybe he said both things in very different contexts. In any event, what we have in God’s Word, as revealed through Mark’s gospel, is an incredible openness to God’s Spirit wherever the Spirit is working and *whomever* the Spirit has empowered.

“Whoever is not against us is for us.” If we apply that to the work of the Church today, it opens up a wide field of potential partners with whom we might work as we engage in Jesus’ mission in *this* place and in *this* time. You don’t have to agree with us on every front, you don’t have to look like us or act like us in every way, you don’t have to even be an explicitly Christian group, but if we can find common ground with you – if there are ways that your mission intersects with what we understand to be Jesus’ mission and what we understand Jesus to be calling us to do – then let’s figure out some ways to work together. Maybe you’ve got people and funding, and we’ve got underutilized space both here and at Camp; let’s see what we can do together. Because if you’re not against us, then we can probably figure out some way that you can be for us, and we can be for you, and together we can be for the Kingdom of God and the mission of Jesus.

That’s the attitude to which Mark’s Jesus is calling us, and that’s the attitude that we need to have as we move forward with Telling Our Story and embracing the future into which God has called us.

And you know what? Mission and ministry are so much easier when we don’t have to do it all ourselves! Mission and ministry are so much easier when you can make common cause with partners.

Took me a long time to figure that out. When I was a young pastor and someone suggested a good idea, I always thought that *I* had to implement it. I wasn’t even looking for partnerships in my own church; I thought that I had to do it all! And how often, as congregations, when someone suggests a brilliant idea, we let it drop because we’re already feeling overwhelmed and we just can’t take on another thing. But you know, maybe there’s someone in the community who can take on that new idea with us. Maybe there’s someone who can give us a grant, or maybe there’s some organization who can provide volunteers, or maybe there’s some group who can actually do *all* the work and all we have to do is provide space in our building.

I don’t know about you all, but when I think about that I just have to go…[Big Sigh!] What a *burden* off of our shoulders when we realize that we don’t have to do it all! “Whoever is not against us is for us,” and that means that there a whole lot of potential partners out there!

There is power in partnership! Jesus encouraged the disciples to partner with that anonymous exorcist and thus tap into the Spirit’s power to do mighty deeds; and it seems to me that Jesus is similarly encouraging the Church today to be on the lookout for partners. If we rely just on ourselves we’re likely to die alone, but if we die to ourselves and reach out to others we’re likely to find newness of life. Because, as the early church discovered over and over and over again, it’s when we come together in community with others that we tap into the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let me tell you a story about a church that was raised to newness of life through the power of partnership. University Church in Chicago was arguably on its deathbed. Membership, worship attendance and income had all been in decline for decades, and there were some Sundays when they were more people in the choir than in the congregation. There was a great music program, a beautiful building and some wonderful people in the congregation, but the numbers were trending ever downward.

But there were folks in that troubled church who were willing to take some risks, and folks in the troubled community around it who had some vision. The vision said, “We need to develop programs for the youth in our community, or they’ll to continue to drop out of school, get into drugs, and join street gangs.” The risk takers at the church said, “Hey, we’ve got all this space that isn’t being used during the week, let’s see what we can do together.” So a youth center was created and set-up in the church, a youth center that included job training and counseling and just a safe place to hang out. Of course, some of the church members weren’t at all happy about it. They said, “Who are these people? And why are they taking over our building?” They were more interested in protecting their turf than in engaging in mission. But once the youth center was established, here’s what happened. Folks in the community recognized that there were exciting things going on in that building during the week. And a few of them decided to check out the place on Sunday morning, and they discovered that there were exciting things going on in the building on Sundays as well: good preaching and engaging worship, and they decided to stay! The primary goal of establishing the youth center wasn’t church growth, it was mission. But the consequence of being mission-focused was…church growth. And it was all made possible by partnership.

Of course, in the final analysis, it was made possible by the Holy Spirit. “Whoever is not against us is for us,” Jesus said, and when the Church reaches out to those who are not against us and who are potential partners with us, we often find the Holy Spirit moving in unexpected places. And then the Spirit can water the ground which we’ve been tilling for so long, and bring forth new fruit from what might seem to be depleted soil. Protecting our own turf causes erosion, and soon the turf is gone. But reaching out to others in the name of Jesus can produce partnerships that bear fruit and bring the Kingdom of God ever nearer. Amen.