

Where 'Us' Becomes 'Them'

Mark 9:38-42

Introduction

Where do you draw the line between “us” and “them”? Where does it change from seeing someone who is part of the same group that you are to that person being part of a different group? People go from being one of “us” to one of “them.” Some people argue that any such distinctions are arbitrary and unhelpful but that really ignores the reality that “us” and “them” starts from infancy as a child learns to differentiate her or himself from others and one family from another it also ignores the importance that people often find support from people in a similar life experience.

A couple of teachers catch up with friends they went to university with who have gone off and are working in a different industry and they receive the usual comments, “It must be nice to have all those holidays. You only work 9 to 3 and then get longer holidays to boot! Gee, you teachers have it tough!” The teachers later comment to each other that others don’t know the true workload or expectations which teachers face. “Us” teachers are misunderstood by “them.”

However, it’s one thing for differences of identity to be quite natural to us humans but what happens when people draw the wrong boundary markers. What would happen if cricketers who played one-day cricket thought they were fundamentally different to cricketers who played test cricket or twenty 20 cricket?

This morning we’re going to consider how the disciples put up an incorrect boundary through mis-placed partisanship and how this is contrasted with where Jesus puts the boundary marker between “us” and “them.”

They’re Not In Our Team (v. 38)

Let’s look at the disciples first. Although John is identified as the speaker on this occasion it’s apparent that he’s speaking for the disciples together. “‘Teacher,’ said

John, ‘we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.’”

For John and the disciples the deciding factor as to when “us” became “them” was whether someone was in the select group of the twelve. This person was not one of “us” and so should not express such a ministry or display such power. To go back to our earlier illustration, John’s saying, “If you don’t play cricket with us you’re not allowed to play cricket at all.”

I wonder if John and the other disciples were maybe a little extra sensitive considering recently nine of them had not been able to cast a demon out of a child but here’s a person who was not part of the inner circle but was succeeding where they’d failed.

For us today where are we inclined to stop people from serving Jesus? Tragically we see this between denomination, sometimes within the same denomination but between churches (“You shouldn’t really have a Bible Study in that suburb because that’s **our** suburb.”) and even within churches (“Sorry, you’re not allowed to share about Jesus or pray for someone until you’ve been appointed by the council.”).

These are all examples of a miss-placed partisanship because the defining factor of this boundary marker is which group you are connected to. Let’s look in contrast as to where Jesus puts any marker between “us” and “them.”

Connection to Jesus Defines The Team (vv. 39-41)

We read Jesus’ response in verses 39 to 41: “‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said. ‘For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.’”

Some people like to think that Jesus simply disbands any separation between “us” and “them” and receives everyone equally no matter where their allegiance or commitment lies but that’s simply not the case. Jesus puts a very clear marker and

requirement in place here. Why are the disciples not to stop what this person was doing? Because it was being done “in Jesus’ name.” For Jesus the marker between “us” and “them” is really between “me” (himself) and anything or anyone else.

The disciples put the marker point as to what group you are part of but Jesus puts the marker point as who you are for. If you are for Jesus then you are not opposed to Jesus even if you weren’t in the immediate and privileged group of the disciples.

Indeed, Jesus provides a little further clarification for his disciples when he says, “Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.” People were not going to receive a heavenly reward because they were nice to just anyone (not that Jesus is opposed to people being nice) but rather because the giver and the recipient of an act of care are connected to him, the Messiah.

So does Jesus put a marker between us and them? Yes, it is himself. What then does that mean for us? Well, it does mean that we are also called to differentiate between ourselves and others but that differentiation is only to be using the same marker that Jesus uses. Of all churches it would be hoped that the Uniting Church should know this better than most but sadly that is not the case.

In seeking to determine if we’re aligned with others we shouldn’t stress about the style of leadership a church uses, whether baptism is for families or just done on individual confession of faith, how often we take communion, whether people practice more dramatic spiritual gifts or not, etc., etc. We are though to determine if we’re aligned with others in one critical area, are they, like us, committed to Jesus as our Saviour, our Lord, as the One to be Worshipped and prayed to and do they love him? If the other groups clearly affirm this then we should not oppose them but rather cheer when they experience growth and God’s blessings.

We’re going to put that into practice after the message but there’s one extra warning which we should keep in mind.

The Great Danger of Hindering Other Christians (v. 42)

The extra section I'd like to look at is in verse 42. In most Bibles verse 42 starts a new section and that's natural as it appears to be the start of a new emphasis on the destructive nature of sin. However, there's also good reason to see this verse as connected to the section we've just covered. Verse 42 has Jesus continuing to speak, "If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung round their neck and they were thrown into the sea."

These are some fairly firm words by Jesus and it's reasonable to see them targeted broadly as causing brothers and sisters in Christ to sin in a general way and so connected with the following verses but I also see Jesus' words here as looking back to what Jesus has been talking about. I think it's reasonable to see Jesus' strong words here to be condemning those who would stop others from witnessing to Jesus and expressing the character of the kingdom which Jesus demonstrated.

I'm reminded of a story of a flight where a young man, who may have had an impairment, was sitting next to two other men. The young man turned to the man beside him and asked, "Why are you flying to Sydney? I'm flying to Sydney to visit my uncle for a week. We're going to have fun fishing together."

The man beside him replies, "I'm flying to Sydney for work."

"Oh." The young man replies, "Work is important but I think I'd prefer fishing. Can you ask the man beside you why he's flying to Sydney?"

The man in the middle dutifully asks and is told, "I'm going to Sydney to meet my granddaughter."

"Oh." The young man replies, "That sounds almost as special as going fishing."

After another moment the young man turns to the man beside him and says, "I brush my teeth every day. Do you brush your teeth?"

The man beside him says, "Yes, I brush my teeth."

"That's good." The young man says, "You have to brush your teeth or they'll turn black and fall out. Could you ask the man beside you if he brushes his teeth?"

The man in the middle again dutifully asks the question and is told, “Yes, I brush my teeth every day.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” The young man replies. After another moment the young man says, “I like going to church and hearing about Jesus. I love and trust Jesus. Do you love and trust Jesus and go to church?”

The man in the middle again replies affirmatively, “Yes, I go to church and I love and trust Jesus too.”

That’s good.” The young man replies, “If you don’t love and trust Jesus you won’t know where you’ll go when you die. Can you ask the man beside you if he loves and trusts Jesus and goes to church so he knows where he’ll go when he dies?”

The man in the middle, now increasingly uncomfortable, asks the man beside him, “The young man beside me would like to know if you love and trust Jesus and go to church so you can know where you’ll go when you die?”

At this the older man replied, “No I don’t go to church but I’d like to know about Jesus. Can you tell me more?”

What would have happened if the middle person, obviously a Christian, had shut down the young man’s questions? “You can’t ask that. That’s rude to ask such questions. I don’t think you’re very qualified to ask such questions, you should just be quiet.”

I can’t remember where I heard that story or if I have the details completely correct but I can tell you other stories of older Christians who learnt lessons of humility, particularly in sharing about Jesus, from younger Christians.

[If time can share the example of Russell Hinds and Rod Story attending the first Evangelism Explosion training in Brisbane. Both had lots of experience and quite a reputation for evangelism and church planing and were teamed up with a much younger and quite inexperienced lass to go out from door to door. “What’s with this simple method of sharing and asking questions like, ‘If you were to die tonight do you know where you would go and why?’” But, in credit to them, they didn’t walk out of the training or shut down the young person asking the questions, and God used that

training and the responses of the people whom they spoke with to humble them and equip them for grater service going forward. Indeed Rod Story went on to head up Evangelism Explosion in Australia]

To shut down the witness of Christians, especially if the motivation is simply one of pride or mis-placed partisanship, can deny others the opportunity to hear about Jesus and experience the release which he came to grant us and which is precisely what the person in verse 38 was doing, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name.” This is actually a terrible sin and so we shouldn’t be surprised that Jesus answers it with strong words.

We’ll look more at the damage that sin does next week but it’s worth seeing the connection of Jesus words to the situation of witness being described here.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we’re going to practice the unity we have with other Christians and churches, particularly those in the Lockyer Valley, by praying for them. I contacted a number of pastors and ministers asking if there was prayer points that they were happy to be made public and the core message was, “Prayer needed for a deeper sense of love, unity and purpose among the body as well as between the churches. We need God to lead us into mission and help us reach out to new people.”

As we come to a time of prayer now, if you have a connection to another church feel free to pray for that church and if you know Christians attending another church please pray that they would live committed to the Lord in the church family where they are and may others hear of Jesus and join them.

[Go into a time of prayer for other churches]