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“Faith That Works 5: Inclusive”

Esther 7:1-6,9-10; 9:20-22 Mark 9: 38-50 James 5:13-20

INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER 7:1-6;9-10 9:20-22

For such a time as this. That’s a synopsis of the book of Esther in one sentence from it. Esther was born for such a time as this. This morning’s text from the book of Esther is an excerpt of a story of a power struggle. King Ahasuerus of Persia (what we call Iran today) has put his wife the Queen away because she refused to come and be put on display for his friends when he called for her to come on the 7th day of a royal banquet. Because she refused to come the King made a decree that she would never be allowed to come into his presence again. He did this so that the rest of the women in his kingdom would not start getting ideas they could disobey their husbands. (This is from the account in scripture) Now without a Queen the King arranges for a beauty pageant of virgins to come before him to find a new queen. Of all those that are brought before him Esther, who was a closeted Jewess, was found to his liking and not knowing she was a Jew, made her his queen. Her cousin Mordecai who had adopted her because her parents were dead was scheduled to be honored at a banquet for foiling an earlier plot to assassinate the King. Haman, a ranking official in the king’s court had a plot to have Mordecai hanged and all the Jews in Persia killed. At risk to her own life, Esther came before the King to reveal Haman’s plot and as a result Haman is hanged on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai. Hear this portion of her story from the book that bears her name, Esther 7:1-6;9-10

In chapter 9 we read of the establishment of the Feast of Purim to remember the heroic actions of Queen Esther who saved her people. Hear the word of the Lord from Esther 9:20-22

INTRODUCTION TO MARK 9:38-50

In the gospel lesson for today, John came to Jesus because he saw someone who wasn’t “a part of their group doing something in Jesus’ name and told him to stop. Jesus told John to stop trying to make him stop. Hear the word of the Lord from the gospel of Mark 9:38-50.

Let’s pray. Dear Lord, Thank you for this, your word. Open our eyes to see, our minds to understand, our hearts to receive your word. Open my lips to share what you have given to me and prepare us all to be changed so that we may respond to your word through the power of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Last Sunday my friend Mike Chatham and his wife Sue came to our Bluegrass Gospel Sunday. I had dropped by his office and left some postcard invitations. As they were leaving I told him he was an honorary Presbyterian for a day. On Monday I attended a funeral for B.J. Boothe at Memorial Baptist and sat with Mike and Sue and he said, “We’re even.” I was an honorary Baptist for a day. We are members of an inclusive club-willing to set foot in one another’s church.

A journalist once asked writer Carl Sandburg, "What is the ugliest word in the English language?" After a few minutes Sandburg replied, "Exclusive." The ugliness of exclusive depends upon whether we are among the included or the excluded. Some pride themselves on being members of exclusive clubs, living in exclusive neighborhoods, dining at exclusive restaurants, vacationing at exclusive resorts, belonging to exclusive churches. Being an insider carries with it a sense of pride and security. Most of us, however, have been excluded often enough to agree that exclusive is an ugly word. When we are among the marginalized, the rejected, the pushed-aside or the left-out, it hurts!" 1

One of the conflicts in the early church centered on the question of who was in and who was out. Were Gentiles to be included? Peter and Paul debated that one until Peter had a dream and concluded that "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34).

The Book of Acts is the story of God's grace through the Holy Spirit, pushing the early church out to the margins and breaking down the barriers between people.

We ARE one in the spirit even though we are different in our response to the Spirit. That's what the body of Christ is supposed to be—each distinct type of Christian working together to reach folks for Jesus.

It is curious how specialized we have become. Notice I didn't say divided. I prefer to look at the multiplicity of distinct denominations of the Christian Faith as specialization rather than as fragmentation. To be sure the first Reformation of 1517 that was led by Martin Luther led to him being excluded-excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. But centuries later we can see God's hand even in that "*diversification*." From that event came a reformation that did much to spread Christianity beyond the limited expression contained in the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. Coincidentally, the invention of the printing press did help the vast amount of specializations because with its invention came the first mass produced versions of the Bible, and with more individuals able to read it for themselves came a wider variety of interpretations. With that wider variety of interpretations came the tendency to fight and argue about which interpretation was right and to exclude those who didn't agree.

We differ in how we pass the peace, how often we celebrate communion, how communion is served, the elements of communion-Wine or Welches, Hawaiian or ... as I wrote about in my column for the Baytown Sun on Friday Pumpkin Spice Wafers...not a real thing). We differ in how much water we use and where. This week I shared a picture of the difference between Baptist Donuts and Presbyterian Donuts. (Baptist donuts are dunked and Presbyterian Donuts have sprinkles) We differ in who we baptize--adults, youth, infants, once, or multiple times. We differ in whether we kneel, clap, have children's sermons, have children's church. We differ in who is allowed to preach, serve in

leadership, in government, whether we wear robes, stoles, play organ, or guitar, use hymnbooks or screens.

According to our gospel lesson this morning this is not a new challenge. When John tattled to Jesus about someone who was casting out demons differently than they were it is obvious that he expected to be congratulated. How little they understood where Jesus' teachings would soon take them. They were part of the chosen people, but soon the doors of Judaism would open to the world.

Moses saved the Jews. but through Jesus the world would be saved. The Jerusalem Temple was the house of God for the Jews but the Church around the world would soon become house of the Lord for the World not in only one location but in locations all over the world. Israel was God's nation but those borders would soon be gone and a new Holy Nation without borders would be established. One priest in the Holy of Holies at a time would be replaced with the priesthood of all believers everywhere. These followers would experience the first Communion in the Upper Room in a few days, but thousands of years later the church would celebrate World Wide Communion Sunday as we will next Sunday!

The disciples wanted to protect their turf, to maintain control, but Jesus had a better way. They were to be the facilitators of a new kingdom, not manipulators of the old. In Jesus' words, "Whoever is not against us is for us." If others come along with gifts and talents, do not hinder them.

The famous evangelist Dwight L. Moody of Chicago, after whom the Moody Bible Institute is named, was once approached on the street by a man who said, "I don't like the way you do evangelism. Dr. Moody asked, "Well, how do you do it?" The man replied, "I don't do it." Dr. Moody said, "Well, I like the way I do it better than the way you don't do it!"

After Jesus responds to John's ridiculous report that they had ordered folks to stop casting out demons because they weren't a part of their group, Jesus delivers a howling reproach...a stern warning, a radical prescription for dealing with sin.

He instructs them not to cause little ones to sin. It would be better to be thrown into the lake tied to a millstone than to do such a thing, he warns. Then he tells his disciples to cut off their hand or foot or even gouge out an eye if it causes them to sin. Better to be handicapped, (literally), crippled or half blind in this life than thrown into hell in the next.

To understand what Jesus is saying here I think it is helpful to use the analogy of an operating room, where radical surgery must be performed. Most of us today would accept the notion that when we develop a cancerous tumor on our eye, hand, or foot, that we cast aside "the offending member"—with regret, of course; but we operate on the assumption that it is better to enter life without the

diseased part than to not to live at all. If a troublesome part hampers our life or threatens our very existence we eliminate it. When a gall bladder or appendix is so badly diseased that it gives us no peace, we cut it out. When a hand or foot is diseased beyond help, we amputate in order to save everything else. When a tumor is malignant and threatens to take our entire life away, we are not hesitant to say to the surgeon, "Yes, cut it out."

Well, what is true in the physical realm, translates over into the spiritual realm. If there is something in our lives: some habit, some action, some attitude, that gets between us and God, we must "cut it out." We should be so intent on eradicating sin that we will cut out, remove it, and do away with any stumbling block. If you cannot control your addiction to pornography cut off your internet connection. If you cannot control your spending habits cut up your credit cards. As Lanie Garrett wrote in her Baytown Sun article this morning, forgiveness is essential to healing. Refusing to forgive our debtors can keep us from having our debts forgiven. Sin is radical and it must be dealt with in radical ways. As Jack Benny used to say, "Now cut that out!"

Mark Twain's once said that when he died, he would like to go to Heaven for the climate, but would probably prefer Hell for the companionship. Mark (Twain) missed the point that Mark (the gospel writer) makes through Jesus' prescription for deliverance from sin. Sin isn't fun. Sin is hell. And hell is serious business. Songwriter Antsy McClain has a song that says, "When you're going through hell don't stop and take a rest."

In addition to Jesus' recipe for healing that includes cutting out things he ends with something that we ought to add to our lives--salt. Be like salt Jesus says. Preserve the truth. Spice up your world. (Not necessarily pumpkin spice) Be at peace with one another. If others are working for the Kingdom, don't stop them. He is saying, "Don't fight turf wars in my name. Protect those who follow me and are weak, like the children, the defenseless, and the poor. Make sure that they too have peace in their lives. Have peace in your own life. Be like salt."

Here's my chemistry lesson for today. Sodium is an extremely active element found naturally only in combined form; it always links itself to another element. Chlorine, on the other hand, is the poisonous gas that gives bleach its offensive odor. When sodium and chlorine are combined, the result is sodium chloride. What is sodium Chloride? Salt. Common table salt. It's the substance we use to preserve meat and bring out its flavor.

Love and truth can be like sodium and chlorine. Love without truth is flighty, sometimes blind, willing to combine with various doctrines. On the other hand, truth by itself can be offensive, sometimes even poisonous. Spoken without love, it can turn people away from the gospel. But when truth and love are combined in an individual or a church, then we have what Jesus called "the salt of the earth," and we're able to preserve and bring out the beauty of our faith.

Why do we not have peace in our lives? Because, at any cost, we fight to protect OUR turf and we fight to get THEIR turf. We do not have peace in our lives because we would rather than tear down the weak than build them up. We do not have peace because we prefer to be salt in the wounds than be the salt of the earth for the world.

As James instructs us a Faith That Works is one that calls us to pray when we are suffering to sing because I'm happy.... to sing songs of joy when we are cheerful, to pray for those who are sick, to confess our sins to one another and to reach out and bring back into the fold those who have wandered away.

Like Esther, we need to use our sphere of influence to advocate for the vulnerable and work for change.

Like the rogue exorcist, wherever we are, we should call on the name of Jesus to cast out the demons that torment and alienate. As Jesus declares, we should be passing out cups of living water to the parched. These things will make of us the salt of the earth we are called to be and keep our focus on following Jesus, not on the faith or lack thereof of others.

In the 5th century there was a monk named Telemachus. He felt God saying to him, "Go to Rome." He was living in a cloistered monastery but he put his possessions in a sack and set out for Rome. When he arrived in the city, people were thronging in the streets. He asked why all the excitement and was told that this was the day that the gladiators would be fighting in the coliseum, the day of the games, the circus. He thought to himself, "Four centuries after Christ and they are still killing each other, for enjoyment?" He ran to the coliseum and heard the gladiators saying, "Hail to Caesar, we die for Caesar" and he thought, "this isn't right." He jumped over the railing and went out into the middle of the field. He got between two gladiators, and tried to stop them. The crowd became enraged and stoned the monk to death.

When the Emperor of Rome, Honorius, heard about the monk he declared him a Christian martyr and put an end to the games. Legend has it that the very last Gladiatorial game was the one in which Telemachus died.

Jesus said to his disciple John, who stopped someone from doing something as great a delivering others from the power of the demonic because they weren't from his small group, "be at peace with each other."

Sometimes it seems we have gladiatorial games going on inside the church, at work, in our government, and even inside our homes. The question is, will we be like Telemachus? Will we be the ones to bring peace? Will we work together with those who are new to the faith? Will we work together with those who have a different view to the faith than we do? Will we work together with those who

don't do it the way we do it yet nonetheless do it? Are we willing to be an honorary Baptist for a day?

I hope and pray we will. I hope and pray that we will work with all of our brothers and sisters to see to it that the church of Jesus Christ will be what Jesus designed to be....a Faith that Works...to be inclusive.

Let's pray. Lord, you can do all things and nothing can surpass your care for all creation. Help us to do what your commandments have taught us, what your prophets declared. Your poets have sung of your goodness and providence, and we continue to see evidence of it all around us. We praise You for your work in our midst, and will honor your name among the nations. We are thankful for your comforting presence during times that try our faith.

We thank you for the example of Esther and Telemachus, one person who stood up and made a difference. Help us to look for the ways we too can take a stand for what we believe and the ways we can stand together for justice and strive for peace.

It seems like every week we have some disaster of nature to pray for. We continue to pray for those affected by the Storms in the Carolinas. This morning we add to our prayers, prayer for Indonesia devastated by typhoon waters.

We also lift prayers for our nation and the divisiveness that threatens to tear us further and further apart. We may be one in the Spirit, but we are not so much in our ways of dealing with each other. Show us what we are called to do in such a time as this? Hear us as we cry out to you and lift to you those on our hearts and those concerns calling us to action.

Have patience with us when we are wayward, and lead us back into your way of truth. When we are fearful of what tomorrow may bring, reassure us through your Spirit. You who gave us our baptism as a sign of our cleansing through Christ, invite us to be nourished at the table of new life. You who spoke through the prophets of promised deliverance, now send your Spirit to accompany us and give us a measure of your wisdom to sustain us through our pilgrimage and lead us at last to your Promised land. Amen.

1 Bishop Kenneth Carder, "Unexclusive Gospel," article in *The Christian Century*, 1997.