

Date: 23.09.2021
Text: Mark 9:37- 50
Title: Don't Stop Him

Introduction

You and I know that humans are innately tribal. We have a strong need to belong to groups (tribes) and maintain fulfilling relationships with others. This need has a significant impact on how we interact with each other and, in turn, on society.

What is a Tribe?

A **tribe** is a group of people that feels connected to each other in a meaningful way, because they share something in common that matters to them. The connection can be based on just about anything: kinship, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, ideology, favourite sports team, whatever.

When we talk about "tribalism", what we're really talking about is a pattern of attitudes and behaviours that human beings tend to adopt, when we come to identify with our tribes.

If there is a negative side to tribalism it is that this connection binds individuals into a group that allows them to make a distinction between **US**, members of the group, and **THEM**, those who are not members of the group. With tribalism people draw hard borders around their communities. In a nutshell, we use the **US-THEM distinction**, defined by tribal boundaries, to make **normative judgments**:

- we're **good**, they're **bad**
- we're **right**, they're **wrong**
- we're **progressive**, they're **fundamentalist**
- we're **worthy**, they're **unworthy**
- we like **hymns**, they like **songs**
- we're **rational**, they're **irrational**
- our beliefs are **true**, their beliefs are **false**

These judgments support behaviours — how we act, what we say, how we treat others who are not members of our tribe how we respond, and so on.

Let us pray...

The brief reading that we just heard, **is it not** a perfect example of tribalism? The disciples come to Jesus, and they say, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." **Translation:** he is not part of our tribe. He hasn't been vetted and

approved by our leader. The disciples suggest the need to be extra careful with this person, but Jesus' answer is surprisingly generous. *"Do not stop him," he says. "If he does good in my name it's all good."* When I read this, I kept thinking, "If only it were this easy!"

But don't you love it when Jesus cuts through all the nonsense and just lifts up one simple truth?

"If someone does good in my name, it's all good!" "Don't stop him!"

By the way I love this quote that is attributed to Harry Truman: *"It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit."* Let us remember that!

While we know the writer of this passage is apparently writing years after the event, the sheer likelihood of such an attitude being shown by the disciples suggests highly plausible reporting. *"John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But 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."*

In Mark 9:38-41 it appears Jesus is encouraging a broad-minded attitude toward those who provide relief but operate outside the disciples' circle: *"Whoever is not against us is for us."*

Jesus will have none of their expressed concern. Jesus will have none of their tribalistic attitudes. Jesus will have none of their parochial mindsets. The call to discipleship, as Jesus explained in Mark Chapter 9 verse 34, is a call to sacrifice and service, not entitlement and privilege. John is apparently viewing the kingdom as a way to personal advancement. We might do well to reflect that these words suggest an openness to include others which is far from modern day norms.

I believe Jesus' answer to his disciples was not only important then, it is also important now, as we translate this gospel to the people of the 21st century.

How tribal are we? Out of the New Testament arises the wonderful vision of a community that is able to include people who are different in many ways, uniting them in a common faith in God. I must admit that vision was not always clear in the Bible; it had to develop over time.

It wasn't there when Abraham and Moses respectively sought the Promised Land, pushing out other people in favour of the Israelites. It wasn't there when the "chosen people," were mainly focused on the fact that they had been "chosen." It wasn't even there when Jesus talked to the Syrophenician woman, telling her

that he couldn't do anything for her daughter, because he had been sent to his own "tribe," the people of Israel.

The vision of that boundless community of God still wasn't there when the Lord asked Peter to eat the unclean animals and embrace the Gentiles, as the gospel pushed past its original tribal boundaries in Judea into the world – and Peter almost vomited.

Yet, at the same time there were signs and words all over the place indicating that the gospel Jesus proclaimed was way too small for one little tribe concerned about their own purity and constituents. We heard it in today's gospel, when Jesus challenged his own followers, telling them not to think too small about God's work in this world, not to be too petty, not to be too parochial, not to be too tribal. *"Do not stop him." "Whoever is not against us is for us."*

We hear it in so many stories when Jesus suggests that he found great faith from people who were not part of the tribe: a Roman Centurion, the Samaritan woman at the well, or in the story of the Good Samaritan for that matter.

We hear it very clearly expressed in Paul's letter to the Galatians, – Paul whose mission it was to go beyond his own Jewish tribe. He once wrote to them, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* (Galatians 3:28)

No more tribalism in Christ, Paul says. In his letter to the Ephesians, he tells the Gentiles who once were clearly not part of the tribe, *"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household."* On and on it goes, and that is the kind of thinking and the kind of vision that helped the Christian faith to become relevant in all the world.

Unfortunately, I see so much petty tribalism in the church and society. You and I know that Christian tribalism isn't new. It's been around since the earliest days of Christianity. Remember in 1 Corinthians Chapter One, Paul says: *... it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided?* The need to belong is a powerful force. But when applied to religion, us vs. them thinking is dangerous and divisive.

Christian tribalism eliminates the need for us to deal with each other as actual human beings. Instead of allowing us to listen to each other, Christian tribalism requires us to fall back on the tired, entrenched positions that define our respective groups.

No event in recent history has shown the evil of Christian tribalism more than the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Within a period of less than one hundred days, more than 800,000 Rwandans were killed by fellow Rwandans, as the rest of the world stood by and watched. The majority of the killings were carried out by ordinary Rwandans against their neighbours using machetes, sticks, and clubs with nails, making the Rwandan genocide one of the most inexplicable tragedies of our time. What makes the Rwandan genocide a particularly chilling and challenging event is Rwanda has been, and perhaps remains, one of the most Christianised nations in Africa. It is estimated that as many as 90 percent of Rwandans in 1994 were Christians— 62.6% Catholic, 18.8% Protestant, and 8.4% Seventh Day Adventist.

Given that the majority of Rwandans were Christians, why did that not make any significant difference when it came to the events of 1994? Where was the church? Did God just turn his back on Rwanda?

The more one investigates these and similar questions, the more one faces the disturbing realization that in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the church was not simply silent, but was intimately associated with the genocide. Not only did the majority of killings take place within or around churches, they involved Christians killing other Christians. The fact that the majority of Rwandans were Catholics meant that often the victims and their killers were quite familiar with each other and had even participated regularly in the same Eucharist celebrations, within the same church. In the wake of the genocide, there have been many attempts to explain the disturbing fact of a genocide taking place within a Christian country and the mass participation by self-confessed Christians in the genocide.

Many different explanations were given for the genocide –

- some have noted the superficial nature of Rwandan Christianity.
- Others have focused on the church's failure to provide moral and spiritual guidance.
- Other accounts have noted how the revival movement of the 1930s was narrowly "spiritual" and did not allow the church to integrate the Gospel with all other aspects of life.
- Still other explanations, while focusing on the political dimension of the problem, have noted the naïve and uncritical view of authority that was encouraged by the church,
- as well as the general lack of democracy and of respect for human dignity in Rwanda in the 1990s

Although there is truth in each of these claims, the underlying problem behind the Rwanda genocide is one of tribalism. When Cardinal Etcheagaray of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace visited Rwanda on behalf of the Pope shortly following the genocide, he asked the assembled church leaders, *"Are you saying that the blood of tribalism is deeper than the waters of baptism?"* One leader present answered, 'Yes, it is.' I am afraid that Cardinal Etcheagaray's question was right on target, and the response of the church leader was even more so. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda had to do, in great part, with tribalism.

As Jesus followers we need to take to heart the message that is imbedded in the Christian gospel – *"There is no Jew or Gentile, no conservative or liberal, no man or woman, no black or white, no gay or straight, no pro-life or pro-choice, (or wherever the fault-lines of the current culture lie) – in Jesus Christ our Lord."* We will all still make our decisions and our choices on these issues. But in a church that goes beyond tribalism, we will find our common ground in the one who transcends all of that.

Paul reminds us that the Church is supposed to be different from the rest of society. While economics and politics rejoice in entrenched positions, competing interests, and **us vs. them** mindsets, the church is supposed to embrace its unity in diversity. Through baptism and Christ crucified, we are one. And in our oneness, we model an alternative vision for the world.

However, Christian tribalism limits our ability to model that vision. We all belong to tribes. But our tribal allegiances need to be secondary to our willingness to relate to people as people. But more importantly, our tribal allegiances, whatever they are, need to be secondary to our commitment to Christ.

Are there any Barthians in MUC? A Barthian is a person who supports or believes in the ideas of Karl Barth. Karl Barth is a Swiss theologian (1886–1968). He evolved over the course of his life but roared through the theological world of the 20th century like a tsunami, challenging the liberal theological systems that ruled the academy and many churches of his day.

Recently I came across this quote from him: *"The world would be lost without Jesus Christ, His word and work... The world would not necessarily be lost without the church."* What do you think? **Let me repeat ...** *"The world would be lost without Jesus Christ, His word and work... The world would not necessarily be lost without the church."* I suspect some of you find this claim of his troubling.

However, you and I know that many who claim membership in the Christian Church are fond of reminding us Jesus said that He alone was *the way to the Father* (John 14:6), and that He alone revealed the Father. (Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22)

But did you notice? If Jesus is *the way* – that when he tells us to have nothing to do with separating off those who are not members of our particular group – in fact calling this action “placing stumbling blocks” – we are hardly following his way by pointing to the heresy of those who will not join us.

For me the way of Jesus is always inclusive, *“those who are not against us are for us”*.
For me the way of Jesus is the always the way of love and embrace of the other.

Never forget that tribalism inspired the lynching trees in America, the chimneys of Auschwitz, the massacres of Lebanon, the genocides of Rwanda, and the gulags of the U.S.S.R. These amount to tens of millions of lives lost.

But 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.”

Tribalism is anti-life, and it is anti-gospel and anti-Christ.

Closing Prayer:

Compassionate God, help us to be more open to brothers and sisters outside our “tribe” and to accept even those we choose to disagree with. **Amen.**