

You may have heard the proverb: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. It pops up in one way or another, in a number of places throughout history. Maybe you've experienced a situation where you had to team up with someone or an organization you view as an enemy or at least do not normally partner with. But in a certain circumstance, you find the best option was to team up and get a job done or work against someone else who causes you both problems. It certainly happens. Now, as Christians we tend to imagine we are so loving that there are no enemies. Which is laughable of course. You may not want to be enemies with another but that doesn't prevent them from being enemies with you. And even Jesus acknowledges there are enemies when he says to love your enemies. It's a sad reality of the human condition but it is a reality.

Jesus seems to consider this in the gospel today. But from a different perspective – more like the friend of my friend is my friend. As usual, we see the disciples get something wrong and Jesus get it right. People seem to be doing good works in Jesus' name but haven't necessarily followed him as a disciple. The disciples think you have to be just like them or forget it and Jesus says as long as people are working in the same direction, that's plenty. A good lesson for us even today. Christians can partner with anyone who may share our values and want to make the Kingdom a reality for all of God's children whether they approach it in Christian terms or not. It can happen today as it happened in the time of Jesus as it happened similarly in the time of Esther.

Esther is quite a story where King Ahasuerus of Persia needs a new wife and has a kind of beauty pageant to choose. Esther joins and wins so her people, the Jews, might be able to survive while in Persia. She becomes his wife and we see the result where her new husband does away with a person in the court who wanted to kill all the Jews. Her success leads to a new holiday mentioned in the passage now known as Purim or the festival of the booths celebrated in winter each year. But what's most important in the context of our readings today is the ability to work with others for a greater good or to overcome an injustice. In this case, Jews and Persians.

One other detail pertinent to the conversation today is how the story of Esther never mentions God. Here and in the Song of Songs, a pretty racy love poem, both leave God out of the story, at least by name. It's important today because Jesus in a way does the same thing by saying anyone can do the works of God, disciples or not. A second detail that is important is how love changes the king's mind and saves the people. Esther decided to be his wife, and again, we may have issues with this in our way of thinking but it is her decision to operate this way and it is effective. He fell in love with her and because of their love, changed his outlook. The disciples of Jesus are certainly not behaving in a loving way and certainly not winning hearts and minds. Even for Christians who feel strongly about evangelism and conversion, love has to be a key component or what are we exemplifying and how do we expect people to be moved to accepting the gospel as their way of life?

So, are we loving people, who encourage others through our example either to walk the same Christian path or at least to live by these values, and do we exemplify this love by not simply partnering with fellow Christians but with all of God's children to make the Kingdom of God a reality for all? One way we might consider this question is in context of the great division Christians have had for some time now in our nation which have manifest themselves in clear

lines drawn in our politics. For a group who call ourselves the body of Christ and have the responsibility of spreading the gospel I think we are doing a deplorable job. There is too much contempt and we need to find a path forward. Enough is enough and I would ask us to be very deliberate about healing wounds and closing rifts. To that end I would invite us to consider a gathering at St. Mark's around having difficult conversations and ways to have civil discourse.

Indeed there is work to be done. Even our own Episcopal Church has recently split into the Anglican Church of North America over the issue of gay ordination and marriage. But I take some solace from scripture where we see in Acts 15, James telling Peter and Paul to go their separate ways in order to keep the peace and continue the mission of the Church. From day one we have had differences. It's why we have the Nicene Creed, an effort at unity for a divided Church all the way back in the 4th century. Sadly, this is nothing new, but it also means we don't need to fret; the Church has continued and will continue however imperfect we are.

There are areas for work but we can take some pride in ways we are living into Jesus' call to work with all of God's children. One example we just commemorated this week on the Church calendar. September 25 we remember Saint Sergius of the Russian Orthodox Church. Partly because we have the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius which is an ecumenical ministry between the Orthodox and Anglican Churches. You may notice the name St. Alban for the Anglican part of this relationship. St. Alban is considered the first, British martyr who was a Roman soldier who used the clothes of a priest to disguise himself thus saving the priest and dying in his place. Who was this priest who so inspired a Roman, pagan soldier such that he would die for him? How wonderful a story that sharing the gospel can have such an impact on the life of another.

And as an Anglican Church, we have continued to desire more unity. If you look in the BCP on page 876 you will see a copy of the Lambeth Quadrilateral, a document created to find common ideas we share as Christians, as a starting point for deeper connections. And since then we have created many official relationships with Churches around the world and at home like the one we have with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, signed in 1999 at a conference in Colorado and still very alive today and one Sunday a month right here at St. Mark's. And speaking of St. Mark's, we are located on Faith Row and this group of religious organizations will have a gathering for us all and the campus of UConn November 2 at 7 PM to discuss how each faith group understands the afterlife and there will be a second event in the spring. It is wonderful to serve at UConn where people may lead different faith organizations but find common ground in our desire to be here for the students, above all. And beyond campus we are having an interfaith gathering next week to help us all keep moving forward as we live with the Covid pandemic.

Work to be done, successes to celebrate. Our readings invite us to be Christian in a way that asks us to partner with all, perhaps even our enemies we are called to love. It's good work, it's fun work, it's fulfilling work we know we can do because we do it with Christ by our side. We don't have all the answers. So Jesus says Love 'em all and let God sort out the rest.