

Whoever is Not Against Us: Love's (Un)Common Cause

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Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady New York
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Readings:
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Mark 9:38-40

I.

You may recall I went visiting with friends in northeast Brazil last summer. You may have wondered, what is it about Brazil? I had visited once before in 2013, and had a life changing experience. I promised to return, promised myself and promised my friends. But what was it that made such a powerful impression?

I remember my first encounter with their church, early in 2013. So much was different from what I was used to, in the church my friends Wellington and Odja are pastors in, in the city of Maceio. The main worship service at Igreja Batista Pinheiro—that means Baptist Church of the Pine—the main weekly service didn't happen until after dark on Sunday night. The music was different—we were rocking out with a band, unfamiliar tunes in Portuguese. When the preacher preached, it sounded from the tone like an old time Baptist church, full of conviction and loudness and in the end joy, but, Lord have mercy, I could not understand what it was about. At prayer time, people came forward all over the place and knelt on the steps in front of the church, some crying, some simply quiet. So much was different, but at least I could tell that all were welcome, including rich and poor, gay and straight, women and men and youth and elderly, people of every race.

What felt most familiar in that congregation, as I worshiped with them again, was that everyone has a voice, every one matters. The man with disabilities is welcome to speak up. The teenagers are leaders. So it was easy to handle the different music, the fact I couldn't understand more than a few words, the people I had never met before who wanted to hug me, the service that lasted a long time. All that was easy, because I knew we were worshiping the same God, and we were, in vastly different worlds, trying to follow the same Jesus.

The more I got to know them, the more I felt at home. I found out that this was an ecumenical church—they got together regularly with other progressive protestants from around Brazil, and had even co-celebrated communion with a couple of Catholic priests, without the bishop's permission. It felt—and continues to feel, despite the traditional culture, the vast poverty, the language that continues to defeat me—it felt like we had Christ's love in common.

Would that it were so with every church, every community that carries the name of Christ. Stay with me in Brazil for a moment more. In my two short visits to Brazil, I traveled much with Wellington and Odja, and, on occasion, an extraordinary young black philosopher and preacher, Paulo Nascimento. I remember in one town, we stopped at a little mission their church had started. Across the street, we could hear music booming out, a Pentecostal worship service. We asked our hosts if they had a relationship with that OTHER church, right across the street. Yes, Pastor Wellington told us, a one-sided relationship. When they first started their mission to drug addicts on the beach, their very conservative church neighbors were less than excited. They succeeded in blocking the new church from even putting up a sign on the street. But now it was a little better. “Do you get together to visit?” one of my fellow visitors asked. Wellington smiled like an angel, “Well, they do not come to see us-- they are convinced we are not Christian. They have heard about us. But we go in and say hello to them, whenever we are here, and then they have to talk with us, a little. It would be rude not to! We will continue to visit them.”

II.

When Joshua heard that two who hadn't shown up at the official meeting but stayed in the camp had started to prophesy, he was upset. He went to Moses. When Jesus' disciples heard about someone they didn't know going around doing healings in his name, they were upset. They wanted to know what to do about it. They went to Jesus. *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."* Who was this interloper, this new kid on the block, this potential sheep stealer? But Jesus understood something his friends didn't—there was some kind of power in claiming to do healing in *his* name that ultimately was going to transform this stranger, even if it hadn't yet. And there was something good in who the healer was already, even if they could not see it yet. They needed to trust God to bring them together.

Now just what was the power that bound this stranger to Jesus and his disciples? What kind of force could bring around a stranger?

I have read biblical commentators who suggest that there was power in the act of physical healing that came from on high: what Jesus was saying was that the same power was going to come zap the unauthorized healer and transform him or her as well. I have read others who say that it's about a mystic power in the very name of Jesus— in the words of one old hymn “There's something about the Name.” Or another, “At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow...” Well, that's all fine! So there surely is power in the name. And there is power in the healing. But *what* is the power in the healing, and what is the power in the name? It's not ordinary magic. It isn't the power of fear, or political power. It isn't even the zap, the lightning bolt. This power is the power of Love.

Love is what came down at Christmas. Love is what motivated an obscure rabbi from Galilee to stand up to kings, and speak uncomfortable truth to power, even though he knew it would mean death. Love is the power that Christ harnesses for healing. Love is what Christ is all about—love from above, love bubbling up from below, love between friends—and yea, verily, love for a stranger, even love for the person from across the street who won't talk to you, love for an enemy or competitor.

We don't need to go all the way to Brazil to find Christians who won't speak to each other, or folk who think they are using the name of Jesus to heal, but in ways that seem to us very strange, and hardly in keeping with the Prince of Peace, the messiah we know. We don't even need to leave Schenectady, to find other Christians who see you and me as the ones who have it all wrong, and make the assumption that you and I are the unauthorized healers, the ones misusing the name of Christ. There is something a little strange and sad, that a movement founded in the name of God's love, Christianity, has such a capacity to breed mistrust, competing orthodoxies, division.

After two thousand years still not figured out what the power is that's in the name, what the magic is that's in the healing.

III.

About eighteen years ago, two little churches with great ministries and a commitment to staying in Schenectady got it together, despite long historical divisions, different worship styles, and different denominational families. Gathered in the name of the same Christ, and located but a few blocks apart, the folk at Emmanuel Baptist Church and Friedens United Church of Christ found that there was something that bound them together, despite institutional identities that were separate. Now I wasn't here—so I can't say for sure what was it that you had in common that made it worth the effort to federate, to become a new congregation that included the fullness of the old but a commitment to doing it all together in the future? What was it?

As we continue to move into God's future, we will continue to need to be open to the movement that brings together strangers and friends and sometimes even enemies, in the name of the kind of Love which is our salvation. For the past several months we have shared space with a little Pentecostal church in this very building—Ted Ward, the pastor, is a colleague I am proud to have in our building. We have a two sided relationship. And God bless him, he is going to introduce this newcomer to some preachers I would otherwise never have a chance to visit with. Conversations with our Methodist neighbors continue this very Tuesday evening, this time at their initiative, as we continue to share with each other about youth and children's ministry. This past week, the branch of Catholic Charities that does healthcare coordination for AIDS patients and others with chronic illness moved into our building. And in another direction I am excited to say that Rabbi Matt Cutler, whom many of you know well, the rabbi at Temple Gates of Heaven, has said yes to preaching here on a Sunday morning, either in December or January—date being finalized.

There's too much need for the power of Love—God's love-- for any of us to get in its way, in this town or in the world. And at the same time, the particular witness of this church remains necessary, there is a place for us, even a place that may make some of our fellow pilgrims and co-religionists uncomfortable. I remember the day about twenty years ago when two women first walked into my office, looking for a church in which to have their wedding. They had been all over town, not too much luck. But someone told them they ought to try us. Unauthorized Christians, unrecognized by church or state, they wanted their marriage in the presence of God.

Here is the reality, friends. There are people all over the place who have experienced the power of love, Christ's kind of love, who do not meet the standards of much of the church—or at least not their impression of what those standards might be. They don't believe right, so they are heretics. They don't live just so, so they assume they are thought of as sinners. They don't belong already, so they are received with mistrust or not received at all. And some of you know all this way better than I do because you have been where those two women stood, uncertain at the doors of the Church.

Now this church, this Emmanuel Friedens Church, has a peculiar calling. Because all are welcome in this place. We want some more heretics. We want some more misfits, we want to offer a home for some spiritual sojourners, we want to appreciate the beauty and support the gifts of some more unauthorized healers. And some day, we believe, some day somehow, the name of Christ we bear, the healing we practice, will bring us all together, across the street, across town, across the deep divides of theology and history. There is power in the name. There is power in the healing. It is the power of Love.