

**Sunday, September 26, 2021**

**Sermon: In Jesus There Are No Outsiders: Rev. Rodney Kennedy**

Mark 9:38-50

Yogi Berra, baseball player for the ages, and American saint died in 2015, but his legacy lives. The nickname Yogi was bequeathed to him by an American Legion teammate who said, "You look like an Indian holy man." The name stuck. Yogi. Baseball's holy man.

Yogi's sayings became famous.

"It ain't over till it's over."

"It's like déjà vu all over again."

"When you come to a fork in the road, take it."

"Baseball is ninety percent mental, and the other half is physical."

"All pitchers are liars or crybabies."

"Little League baseball is a very good thing because it keeps the parents off the streets."

Yogi's wife once asked him where he wanted to be buried. Finally, he told her, "I don't care where you put me. Surprise me."

What does Yogi have to do with Jesus? Well, the lectionary gospel reading for today contains some rather enigmatic sayings of Jesus that sound as far-fetched as a "yogisim."

"The one who is not against us is for us."

"If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."

"Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with each other."

Jesus also said: "Take up your cross daily and follow me."

"Give all your money to the poor and come and follow me."

"Forgive your brother or sister not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Yogi and Jesus. Who knew? Yogi said that he didn't always know what he was saying. Jesus, well, that's a different story. Jesus knew what he was saying; whether we know what Jesus was saying is also a different story. Since speaking "American" is our first language and not "Jesus," we often have translation problems. Our secular culture doesn't know "Jack" about Jesus, and they are not even aware of how desperately they need to know Jesus: The way, the truth, and the life. While the offerings of the secular life have gone digital, the whole world has gone digital, and the offers are more enticing, colorful, and even somewhat satisfying, the road always ends up with a lament: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. The flourishing lifestyle of secular life turns out to be the most faked of all experiences.

One day, John hustles up to Jesus and says that he stopped someone from healing in the name of Jesus because he was not one of us. So this is where the church got this whole "us" vs. "them" virus. In the midst of a secular onslaught, the church still debates who is "in" and who is "out." And not just any old "Them," but a "Them" that was speaking in the name of Jesus. How tragic that tribes with a common God, common Lord, common salvation, are more often at one's throats than they are in communion with one another. John wants to police what people can do in the name of Jesus. It's an understandable impulse. There are Christians who want to police culture, police the nation. It's like they attended a police academy instead of a baptism class before conversion. There's a murmuring across the land from those who swear they are the only true Christians. They have a scorecard and check marks indicating what makes a true Christian and trust me it will not be enough to be a caring, loving, witnessing, faithful, follower of Jesus. There's other stuff you have to support or you will be excluded and not be a candidate for the rapture. There's this evangelical threat that we are going to be left behind. I don't believe in the rapture but some days, I dream of it happening. Talk about putting one political party in a bind.

And guess what? John doesn't come across very well in this encounter. He has been one of Jesus' best students and yet what he got out of all that biblical instruction was "Us. Vs. them." He missed that God was a God without borders. He missed that God is not in the business of "those people." Maybe John's attitude still lives among those who are so upset over Critical Race theory, wokeness, and whether America was born Christian.

What if we understand *the very epistemic ground* upon which the House of Evangelical Denial of Racism is built to be structured by a kind of racism that is less about individual and more about collective commitments to the maintenance of white supremacy and the perpetuation of what Chela Sandoval calls the “apartheid of theoretical domains”?

Maybe John was merely looking out for self-interest. After all, he and his brother had the nerve to ask Jesus to give them the two top cabinet positions in the coming kingdom – one to sit on the right hand and one on the left hand. Matthew, when he wrote his gospel, was so disturbed by what John and James asked of Jesus that he edits the story and has the mother of James and John make the request. John manages to get everything wrong. He’s wrong to inject “us” vs. “them.” He’s wrong to make faith about power. When the church is offered secular power, we should refuse it. Turn it now flat. Say no thank you and run like the devil. There’s nothing that this world has that a Christian actually needs. We already have a citizenship in heaven. We already have the keys to the kingdom of God. We already have riches untold. This world has nothing for us, and nothing to offer us. John, Jesus’ John, was wrong!

Well, John was right about one thing: What is said in the name of Jesus really does matter. What is said in the name of Jesus is a much bigger issue in America today than it is elsewhere in the world. Many Christians are embarrassed by the name of Jesus because just saying the name of Jesus may mean that we are not really that smart; that we didn’t go to a really good school; that we are not really part of polite, elite, acceptable society. A lady once announced to me after church, “I want you to know that I’m leaving this church. You talk about Jesus too much!” Guilty as charged. I didn’t know what to say. She was of the mindset that we should leave the Jesus talk to the Pentecostals and the assortment of charismatics in our midst. All those people who go on and on about Jesus and sound like they just walked out of a Flannery O’Connor short story: “JESSUUUUUSS”! All those people who do faith healing on television and send prayer clothes in the mail to get donations. People who talk about Jesus are suspect – they might be one of those religious crazies.

Still, the name of Jesus gets a lot of attention among Christians. NT scholar N. T. Wright says that the difference between America and England, is that almost everyone in America still insists Jesus is on their side, while in England no one cares much either way. We sling the name of Jesus around like a platinum

American Express card connecting it to every issue and every product on the market. Yogi Berra once said, "I never said most the things I said. Well, Jesus never said a word about many of the causes he now allegedly supports. There's stuff Jesus is against and some Christians insist Jesus is for it. I think it is nervy to say that God doesn't call women to preach considering how Jesus elevated the status of women. And the gay issue? Jesus as anti-gay. Incredulous. And the race issue? Jesus as a racist? Give me a break. The television evangelists say Jesus is for them getting very, very, very rich. The politicians say that Jesus supports them.

"In the name of Jesus" has lost its trademark value; it doesn't have quite the punch today as it had in the first century. Any decent trademark lawyer could make a bundle defending Jesus from trademark infringement, slander, and intellectual property theft.

Jesus says that the speaking of his name releases a power that no one can control. The name of Jesus stands for the kingdom of Jesus. There's no deception, duplicity, dishonesty in Jesus. The man and the name are one and the same. The name of Jesus is the kingdom of God unleashed in the world. It's the name we can trust and in trusting Jesus we trust his way of love and mercy in the world. Only good can accrue to those who spread God's mercy to as many of God's creatures as possible.

Jesus never authorized any elite "in" group to have an exclusive right to teach and heal in his name. No single group has the copyright to the teachings of Jesus. He never gave us permission to ruthlessly attack those we label "outsiders."

Given the current state of Christian behavior in America, these words of Jesus should grab us by the throat, because Christianity has become a toxic environment. In 1958 Eugene Burdick and William Lederer wrote a political novel, *The Ugly American*. Today someone could pen a book and name it *The Ugly Christian*. Poor taste and bad manners taint faith. And people are turned off by ill-mannered, obnoxious, pushy, eccentric, in-your-face religion. I just saw a review of a forthcoming book about the toxic workplace. It's an apt metaphor: Our culture is toxic, and the church is providing the fumes. We need toxicity alarms instead of carbon monoxide alarms in our churches.

Now, there are these verses in the middle of our reading today that are just scary. I can't gloss over them without comment. In line with the power that is unleashed with the name, Jesus warns the people of the world not to mistreat his followers. This is not a treatise on hell but on not mistreating Jesus' followers. A kind of protection accrues to the people of Jesus' name. They will not be hurt even by death. In plain English, Jesus says, "Don't mess with my children." The words are hard and scary words: "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." Three times Jesus says that it would be better to be maimed than to be thrown into hell. If we offend or hurt one of Jesus' "children" we would be better off condemned to die by capital punishment – a millstone around the neck. The word translated "hell" is Gehenna and was the smoldering, stinking, worm-riddled garbage dump outside Jerusalem next to where Jesus would be crucified. We would be better off thrown to the garbage heap than for us to go around hurting the followers of Jesus.<sup>i</sup> According to Jesus those who offend and hurt Jesus' people will face consequences so terrible that a horrifying death would be preferable. Again, there is this sense of an amazing power that the world can't see or recognize, and it is loose in the world and it will bring about judgment and justice against those who hurt Jesus' children. The children of Jesus are engaged in saving the world while the secularists are making money. Don't mess with Jesus' children. He takes it seriously. He gathers his children like a hen gathers her brood under her sheltering wings. If you are one of Jesus' children, and the secular world is hassling you, they don't know, they have no idea, who they are messing with. This is not intended as condemnation or a scare tactic to be used against others, but as encouragement that Jesus never leaves his children out on a limb. WE don't have to be defensive, nervous, off-putting, arrogant, adamant, angry. Jesus has claimed us in our baptism and we belong to him. We can let go of the attempt to control the handles of history.

Instead of being the controllers, Jesus says we are the salt of the earth. Christians are the flavoring, not the main course. So many Christians want to be the main dish. "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Salty peacemakers? Now, that's an vivid analogy.

Now do we see? Jesus asks us to enlarge the party of “us” and get rid of the party of “them.” In Jesus Christ there no outsiders. The name of Jesus will be broadcast across our city by how we depend on one another, trust one another, and relate to others with grace and good taste and good manners. Not being in charge and not lording it over others – that’s the Jesus way! No outsiders! All insiders! The Jesus way! Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more! The Jesus way!

---

<sup>1</sup>In the Old Testament, we read: “When God’s people were few in number, of little account, and strangers in the land, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people, God allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, ‘Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.’” The great Gamaliel, Supreme Court of Israel veteran and Pharisee leader, said of the disciples of Jesus: “Leave these men alone.”