

## **The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Proper 21**

**Holy Comforter Church**

**The Rev. John E. Shields**

**September 27, 2009**

**Have you ever noticed that we like to label Sundays with certain names? These are not official names but are often so named because of an event we are going to have -- like Youth Sunday or Stewardship Sunday. Sometimes a Sunday will pick up an unofficial title because of something like the Collect. For instance, On the Third Sunday in Advent we have a Collect that says, “Stir up your power O Lord and with great might come among us.” Some people talk about this as ‘Stir Up Sunday’.**

**These are unofficial titles, just labels we put on Sundays because of special events or liturgies or other things.**

**In thinking about this in terms of today’s lessons, I have come up with what I think would be an appropriate label for today. Today is “My Way or the Highway Sunday.” I like that; it’s a phrase you hear a lot, ‘my way or the highway.’**

**One of my favorite theologians is the Rev. Will B. Dunn. He is the preacher in the comic strip ‘Kudzu’. This strip is no longer published due to the death of its author and creator. The Rev. Dunn received a letter from Clyde: “Dear Preacher, Define Monotheism. Clyde.” Will B. Dunn answers: “Dear Clyde, It’s Yahweh or the Hahweh.”**

**Now the reason I think that we can call this Sunday, “My Way or the Highway Sunday,” becomes clear in the lesson we have from the alternative Old Testament reading from the book of Numbers and the Gospel of Mark. In the Gospel, the disciples come to Jesus and tell Him, “There’s a fellow out there casting out demons in your name, and we told him to stop because he is not one of our crowd.”**

**In the alternative lesson for this morning from the book of Numbers, we have two people – Eldad and Medad (Don’t you love those names?). Eldad and Medad somehow have gotten the spirit of Prophecy, but they did not attend the required meeting that the 70 elders had been called to by Moses. They did not attend the meeting but, nevertheless, went out and did the job of prophesying.**

**Others, who had no doubt been to the meeting, heard that this was happening, they wanted Eldad and Medad stopped or punished – they were prophesying, you might say, without a license.**

**It often occurs to me in reading the Bible, that well-known saying “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” The elders in the story from Numbers and the Disciples in the account in Mark are acting just like we do sometimes.**

**There is that tendency, (isn't there?) to think that our way is the only way and the people who are not doing things our way need to hit the road or 'my way or the highway.'**

**Unfortunately, that seems as prevalent in religion as in other spheres. For example, if we don't pray to God in a certain way, if we've not been Baptized in a certain manner, if a Communion service is not done in a certain way -- then the sacrament isn't valid, or if valid, at best, second rate.**

**I see in these lessons grave warnings to religious people, particularly religious leaders and most particularly the clergy. These are clear warnings against the arrogance of "my way or the highway" kind of thinking.**

**Our problem in the church is that we sometimes think that we can put God in an Episcopal box or a Roman Catholic box or a Baptist box – that somehow God is no bigger than our ability to develop Theology about God.**

**Today's lessons serve as a warning to all those who think that their way of worship is the only valid worship. Today is a warning to all those who think that only their music is pleasing to God. Today is a warning to those who think their theology is the only understanding of God. Today's lessons are a warning to those who think there is only one type of valid witness to the Christian faith. (It is possible that not everyone who disagrees with you is wrong!)**

**When the Israelite elders took their ‘Eldad and Medad’ problem to Moses --- about their prophesying without a license, Moses, who was the ultimate authority in the matter, said that he wished that everybody had the kind of enthusiasm that Eldad and Medad had -- for everyone would be better off if that were the case.**

**When the Disciples came to Jesus and said, “... we saw a fellow casting out demons in your name and we forbid him to do it because he’s not one of our crowd.” Jesus said, “Do not forbid him for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able to speak evil of me, for he who is not against us is for us.”**

**Those who would prophesy even if they don’t have a license, those who would cast out evil, even if they are not in our group --- Moses and Jesus are saying these folks are on the right side, even if they don’t wear our label.**

**It sounds to me like Moses and Jesus are more interested in sincerity and integrity than right words or right labels. Moses and Jesus are proposing that we drop our “My Way or the Highway” mentality and realize that God’s way is a grace filled highway wide enough to include and save us all.**

**These lessons are particularly appropriate for me, and I think for Holy Comforter this week. It is so easy for me to start defining**

**reality out of my white Southern American Episcopal experience. It is therefore easy to try to put God into a white, Southern, American Episcopal box.**

**On Thursday evening I went to Covenant Presbyterian Church to hear Archbishop Elias Chacour of the Melkite Catholic order. Father Chacour is a Palestinian Arab whose family has lived in what is now known as Israel for centuries.**

**He defies every stereotype that we have seen and heard about Palestinians – his family ancestors were Christians centuries before the word of Christ had reached Europe and certainly before there was even a notion of a Church of England or a United States of America.**

**This man whose family home of several hundred years was taken from those living there in the late 1940's, has dedicated his life to the effort of peace and reconciliation between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He has built and runs schools where children from these various backgrounds and beliefs learn and live together.**

**Certainly hearing him helped shred my stereotypes of Palestinians and got me in touch with how broad and different the ministry of Christians is and needs to be.**

**This evening we will be doing something new and different here at Holy Comforter Church. We will be celebrating the Holy Eucharist in Spanish. We are particularly blessed that Bishop Hector Montoroso will be our preacher and celebrant at that service.**

**We have no idea how many people may be coming to this service. We have no idea what the long term viability is for a Spanish language mass.**

**But we need to be clear about this – certainly we hope it is something being offered that will have meaning and fill a need for those attending who are new to Holy Comforter. But it is very important to realize that we are also doing this ministry for ourselves – to meet a need we have to answer God’s call.**

**We need our new friends and worshipers – we need their friendship and we need their perspective. We need help in seeing Jesus beyond our own narrow definitions and ministries. We need help in expanding our relationship with God by the expansion of our relationship with others who are different than we.**

**It is certainly no longer “my way or the highway” in our understanding of ministry and mission. Maybe it is now “God’s way is the highway.”**