

19th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21B
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

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When was the last time you got some really good news? Recently my dad had some scans related to his cancer, and we were waiting anxiously for results. My sister called my parents first, then quickly texted the family: "It's good news! Call Mom and Dad so they can tell you!" This was not what I expected – instead, it was *so much better*. Getting that text, my heart just settled. Even before I knew the test results, I was able to savor that delicious "good news" alert. And soon enough I learned that the cancer is under control for now. Good news is rare enough, you can't help but notice when it comes.

I am guessing most of us came to worship today in need of some good news. And it's my joy to point out to you that by God's grace, good news is all around us, when we have eyes to see it. Good news is in the beauty of this fresh morning. Good news is in the treasure of these brothers and sisters gathered in Christ. Good news is in the energy of our children and the experience of our elders. Good news is in the melodies played and sung to God's glory. Good news is in the bread and wine set out for all of us by Jesus himself, so that we can share this ancient meal with our Lord even today.

Good news is also in the words of scripture, strange as some of those words may seem. It's odd how John tattles to Jesus about someone outside their group who's casting out demons in Jesus' name -- performing miracles but "not following us," John says. His complaint boils down to: "They're just not our kind, Jesus."

But here's the good news: *Jesus is not at all concerned*. Jesus has a much wider picture of God's work: "Whoever isn't against us is for us," Jesus says. When God makes it possible for someone to do a good deed, they get scooped up into God's redeeming purpose. Even a small act like giving someone a cup of water makes them part of God's wide and great work of love. So here's the good news: God's team is bigger than we know. And our work for God is so significant and challenging, we ought to accept help wherever we can. Even if it means finding allies in people who "aren't our kind."

I wonder how we can best hear these words today. Is it possible for us to imagine how God could be at work through "other brands of Christians" who disagree with us on important issues? Can we imagine taking part in spirited disagreements with those who "aren't our kind" while also respecting everyone's worth and dignity? It may be difficult to imagine respectful partnership among Christians of different stripes. It's certainly not what we see modeled in our public life.

And yet – here’s the good news. This is exactly what Jesus provokes us to imagine this morning. Imagine forming alliances with those we see as “not following us.” Envision a reign of justice so vast that it draws together even sworn enemies. A redeeming work so surpassing it unites the human family across all divisions. Because that is what God is working in all of us through Jesus Christ – and it is truly good news, the best news of all. Even if we cannot see the fruits of it just yet. Yet today Jesus is calling us to watch for the signs, because even the smallest thing – like giving and receiving a cup of water – can be a sign of God’s reconciling, world-transforming work.

It’s been a traumatic week, especially for those who are survivors of sexual assault. I’m old enough to remember watching every moment of the Anita Hill hearings in 1991. Now a new generation of young women and men is being exposed to both the incredible courage it takes for a woman to speak publicly about her trauma – and what it’s like when powerful people remain unmoved by her truth-telling. It has been difficult for any woman not to take these proceedings personally, and they have stirred painful memories.

The most important thing I can do this morning is to offer love and care to those among us who have experienced sexual abuse or assault. The fact is that one in four women has been abused sexually, and one in seven men have been abused. As your pastors, we say loud and clear that this congregation is committed to being a safe place for you, a place free of abuse and a place where you can be heard and supported. We are praying today for all survivors of trauma, we are praying for healing and for justice. We are praying and working for a day when no form of abuse against anyone will be tolerated. We all have a lot of work to do.

Even while we are standing for justice, we are called to resist the forces that would divide and splinter Christians, or Americans for that matter. It was shocking to me how quickly that Senate hearing turned into a raging partisan shouting match. This week’s events do threaten to divide women from men, prep-school alumni from public school folks, the Washington inner circle from the rest of us, not to mention Republicans from Democrats.

This is a time that calls for allies. As I understand it, an ally is someone who is willing to cross over dividing lines to stand with others who are vulnerable or experiencing injustice. An ally is someone in a position of privilege or power, who chooses to use their power to advocate and work against oppression. An ally doesn’t have to cross over that line. An ally chooses to cross over and share their influence for the greater good.

I have a male friend who every Thursday posts a facebook picture of himself dressed in black with the caption: *Towards a world without rape and supremacist violence #Thursdaysinblack* Every week. He keeps reminding us of the reality of rape and violence. He is an ally.

I know a father who’s learning to be an ally with his child who was born a girl but now identifies as a young man. This father admits that he doesn’t completely understand the transgender reality, and he doesn’t always know the correct words to talk about it, but he is willing to learn. He is an ally. He is lending his love, support, and strength.

Our own Bishop Dave Brauer-Rieke is an ally who's lending his power to the struggle for gender justice. In response to the Senate hearings Bishop Dave admitted: "As a man, I do not hear women's voices in the same way I do men's." Yet he also said, "I am thankful that Dr. Ford was able to speak her truth clearly and respectfully." A powerful man who works to listen carefully is a valuable ally. ("Kavanaugh/Ford Hearing Reflections" Oregon Synod email 9/27/19)

Our world needs allies to cross over the increasingly daunting divisions – for the sake of justice, for the sake of deeper understanding, for advocacy, for healing, ultimately for health and wholeness in the human family. Those who have more power and privilege are called to stand with others who have less. Jesus speaks of showing care to the "little ones" – the vulnerable, those who need shoring up. And God never, ever gives up on the work of justice. You and I are allies with God in making this world new.

I want to share one more story of profound good news. This week I happened to catch a radio interview with a young man named Derek Black, who was once a rising star of in the white nationalist movement and has broken free to become a spokesperson exposing their tactics. How this young man's transformation happened is amazing, and encouraging.

Derek Black's father was a former KKK Grand Wizard and founded Stormfront, the largest racist hate community on the Internet. His godfather was David Duke of the KKK. White nationalists believe the races should be kept separate, even to the point of establishing a "white nation." They see whites as the victims of oppression, and they manipulate statistics to argue that non-whites are ignorant and violent. They promote anti-Semitism, teaching that there's a wide Jewish conspiracy to promote multiculturalism at the expense of whites. They deny the Holocaust.

Growing up, Derek Black used his skills to market the white supremacist cause to a wider audience. In his teens he started his own hate website, Kids' Stormfront. He made speeches, hosted a radio show, and worked very hard to rebrand these hateful ideas in such a persuasive way that whites across the country could gradually begin to say, "I'm not a racist, of course, but have you even noticed how all the crime happens in black or immigrant neighborhoods? Have you ever noticed how poor they are? Nobody says these things, it's not considered politically-correct, but just between you and me, isn't it refreshing to finally say what we know out loud?" Or shout it out loud even, as we have heard in countless rallies that capitalize on white grievance. Of course we recognize this strain of hatred – what began as fringe ideas are now flowing freely in the mainstream political life of our nation.

It was when Derek left home to attend New College in Florida that his perspective began to change. When the campus found out who he was, most people rejected Derek, but two Orthodox Jewish students – Matthew Stevenson and Moshe Ash -- took the remarkable step of inviting Derek to join them for Sabbath dinner each Friday evening, for two years. It's hard to imagine the courage and patience it required for these Jewish students to offer their friendship and quiet conversation, week after week. White supremacy was never discussed at the table, it

was not about building a case against Derek. Instead they hoped that just by spending more and more time with them, he would be able to begin seeing past the stereotypes to the people. Moshe had lost many family members in the concentration camps, yet Derek denied the Holocaust. Just think of it. Imagine the tenacity and love that required. But these Jewish young men stayed with him, and over time Derek's mind did open, to the point where he was moved to publicly renounce the white supremacist movement in 2013.

Today Derek is an articulate public voice against that hate group. There's a new book that has just come out, and his story is ongoing. It's an example of God's kingdom being advanced in an unexpected way. Redeeming work happening well outside the walls of any church, yet undeniably a part of God's just and loving, saving influence to heal the human family. We could see those friendly Shabbat dinners as a "cup of water" offered to one unlikely person. A simple merciful action that changes the world by God's grace.

Who could have ever imagined? Who would have guessed?

This is the divine work you and I are part of. Thanks be to God. Amen.

These interviews are well worth your time:

How A Rising Star Of White Nationalism Broke Free From The Movement interview with Terry Gross on NPR radio, Fresh Air 9/24/18 <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/24/651052970/how-a-rising-star-of-white-nationalism-broke-free-from-the-movement>

Derek Black And Matthew Stevenson: How Friendship And Quiet Conversations Transformed A White Nationalist interview with Krista Tippett, NPR radio, On Being 5/17/2018 <https://onbeing.org/programs/how-friendship-and-quiet-conversations-transformed-a-white-nationalist-may2018/>

A new book on this subject is *Rising Out of Hatred: the Awakening of a Former White Nationalist* by Eli Saslow (Pulitzer Prize winning author, appearing at the Portland Art Museum Nov. 10)