

**September 30, 2018 • Who are the People of God?
19th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)**

LESSONS

Esther 7:1–6, 9–10; 9:20–22
Psalm 124
James 5:13–20
Mark 9:38–50

THEME

Standing with a persecuted people
What if God had not been on our side?
Standing together at all times
Who is on our side?

OUTLINE OF THE THEME

We live in a world of many different faith communities. We also live in a world where many in our community profess no faith and yet seem to be decent, honest people. Given this, how can we tell who are the people of God? Do we need to? While today's readings may not answer these questions they do give us some clues to finding an answer.

Esther 7:1–6, 9–10; 9:20–22

At many times in their history the Hebrew people struggled with what it meant to live as the people of God. When they were ruled by another empire or living in another country, the answer was not always clear. The book of Esther is a story about Hebrew people living in exile in the Persian empire and the dilemma they faced trying to live faithfully in a different culture. While it is not certain when Esther was actually written (scholars date it anywhere from the last days of the Persian empire in the fourth century BCE to the time of Greek rule in the second century BCE), it is clear that the heroine of the story, Esther, and her guardian Mordecai, have assimilated very well into Persian culture. When Esther enters the competition to become queen to King Xerxes (or Ahasuerus in some translations), Mordecai advises her to keep secret the fact that she is Jewish. When she becomes queen and Mordecai gains influence in the king's court no one seems to realize that they are Jewish. It is only when Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman, the king's chief official, that he is revealed to be Jewish. In revenge, Haman plots to kill him and all the Jews. Mordecai turns to Esther for help. To save her people Esther must place herself in danger and stand with her persecuted people. It is not an easy decision but she chooses to acknowledge her heritage. She calls upon her people to fast and pray with her before she risks going unsummoned to the king to try to foil the plot.

Today's reading is the climax of the story in which Esther reveals Haman as an enemy of her and her people. Esther,

Mordecai and all the Hebrew people celebrate their escape from death in a festival called Purim, still celebrated today. The fact that the book of Esther explained the festival of Purim was what allowed it to be finally accepted in the third century CE as one of the books in the Hebrew Bible. Many did not like it because it was not seen as religious enough. God is not mentioned by name (in the original Hebrew) and Esther, the heroine, is part of a Gentile king's harem before she becomes his queen. Despite this apparent lack of religiosity, Esther is the one through whom the people are saved. The people of God are those who take a stand and risk acting for God in the world.

Psalm 124

The psalm celebrates escape from death at the hands of an enemy. Although they were trapped, God has acted to save the people and set them free. The enemy that threatened to overwhelm them like a flood has been held back. The people of God are those who turn to God, the creator, for help.

James 5:13–20

Because James believes that the prayer of a good person has a powerful effect,

The readings do not give us an easy identification of the people of God. But they give us some identifying questions. Who takes risks to relieve the sufferings of others? Who, in need, turns to God and the faith community for help? Who puts the growth of others before the acknowledgment of their own community? Do we? "When I needed a neighbor were you there, were you there...and the creed and colour and the name won't matter, were you there?"

Biblical Background

The Wondering Church



he suggests that the elders of the church are to be called when a person is in need of healing. They can pray for the sick and anoint them with oil for healing. James sees the believing community as being one where people find themselves supported. The people of God are those who stand with and for one another in all circumstances.

Mark 9:38–50

The disciples come to Jesus about a healer who cast out demons in Jesus' name and whom they told to stop "because he doesn't belong to our group" (vs 38). Their concern is not about what the man is doing but that he was not part of the Twelve. Jesus tells them not to stop the man because "whoever is not against us is for us" (vs 40). Mark's way of telling this story reflects the early church's concern about followers of Jesus who, like most of the Gentile Christians, were independent of the disciples' leadership.

The gospel passage is a reminder to be open to others who act on behalf of Christ even in ways different to one's own. Jesus tells the Twelve it is more important that the "little ones," who were probably new disciples, not lose faith because of the behavior of others in the community. Indeed the disciples themselves must be prepared to change in order to enter God's reign. The people of God care more about people healing and growing in love than they do about their own comfort or status.

Theme Conversation

Child's Faith Question: **Who are the people of God?**

Materials needed: *A variety of colouring implements (crayons, coloured pencils, washable markers, pastels, etc.) and a copy of the Whole People of God picture. (See attached.)*

Show the children the different colouring implements you have. What is different about them? (e.g. look different, different sizes, make different marks on paper, etc.) What is the same about them? (They all colour.) It would be silly to say that one set didn't colour because they weren't crayons, or that only markers were allowed to colour, wouldn't it?

Once, long ago, some of Jesus' friends got upset because people who weren't part of the disciples' group were healing others in the same way as the disciples. But Jesus said, "It doesn't matter if they are part of your group or not. What matters is that they are doing the good things that God wants."

In colouring, as long as we are making a beautiful picture,

it doesn't matter if we use markers, crayons, pastels, paints, etc. In the same way, Jesus was trying to teach his disciples that God's people colour the world with love, to make it a more beautiful place. It doesn't matter who we are, or what we look like – what matters is that we do the things that God wants. It doesn't matter which church we go to – what matters is that we live God's way of love in our world. That's what makes us the people of God!

(You may wish to make a number of copies of the picture and give them to children to colour as a reminder of who are the people of God.)

Suggested Children's Hymns

God's Rainbow

Welcome to this Circle

You Gotta Love

One More Step

The Whole People of God

Sunshine Songbook 13

Sunshine Songbook 54

Rainbow Songbook 63

Rainbow Songbook 41

Rainbow Songbook 54

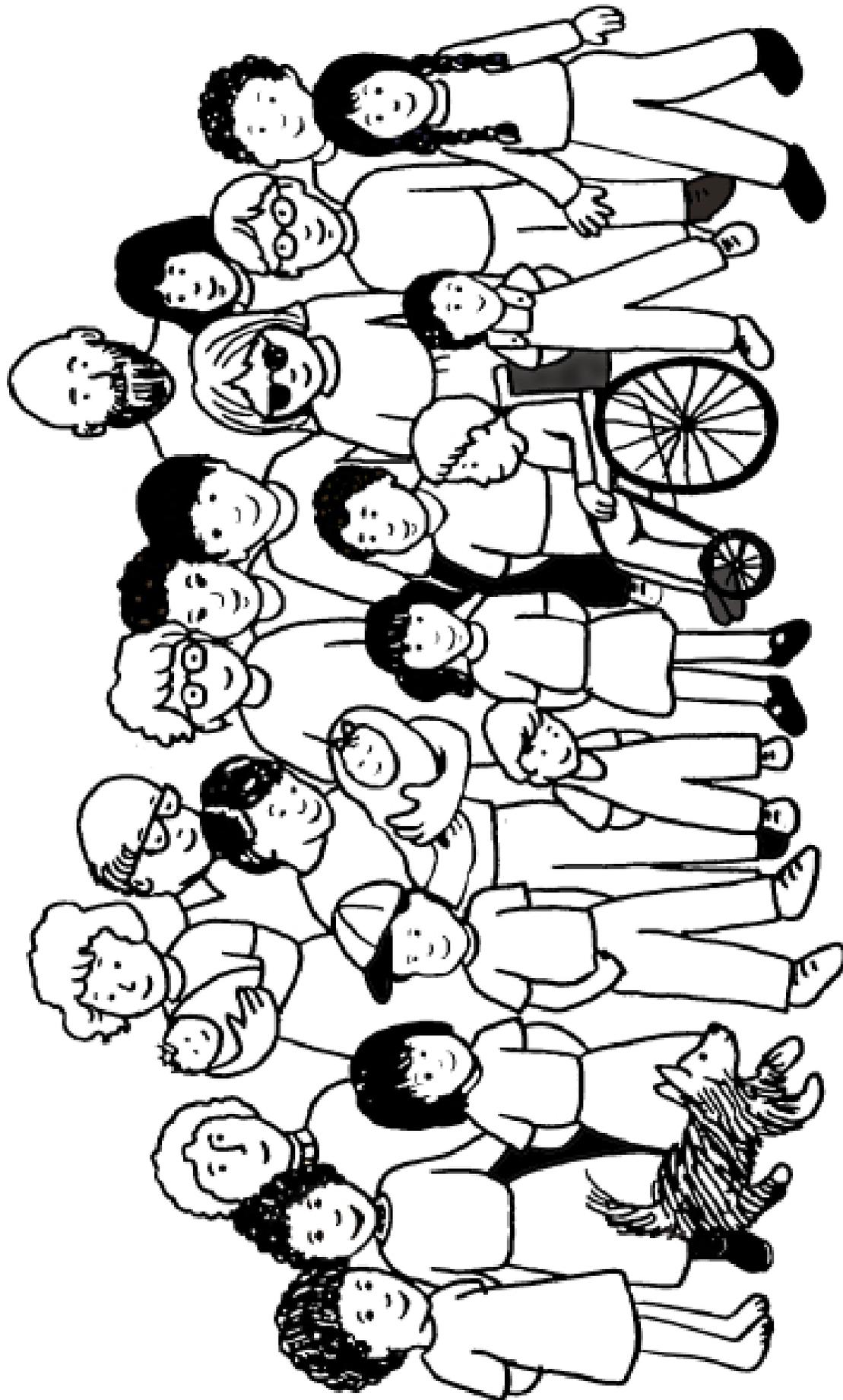
These hymns can be found in many denominational hymnals:

When I Needed a Neighbour

The Church Is Wherever God's People

Jesus, Teacher and Friend

Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love



Whole People of God