

“WHO IS FOR US?” 10/11/15

Scripture: Mark 9:38-41 (40)

Another Exorcist

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.’ But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. **Whoever is not against us is for us.** For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Hymns 1) 530 “God, Our Author and Creator” 2) 504 “You Walk Along Our Shoreline” 3) 177 “God of Change and Glory”

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Blessed be the name of God from this time on and forevermore.

People: From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of God is to be praised.

L: It is good to give thanks to God, to sing praises to your name, O Most High!

P: It is good to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness at night.

All: Let us worship!

INVOCATION & LORD’S PRAYER

Almighty God, you are the source of our life, strength, and ministry. In you we find help, hope, and life. Refresh and renew us in worship, so that we may go forth to do works of love, justice, and mercy with compassion and humility. We pray this in Jesus’ name: “Our Father....”

SERMON

We are so often our own biggest challenge, aren’t we? As we try to do what is right, we keep getting caught up in our categories. It’s not surprising: we are transactional creatures. Every action, every interaction, has some kind of consequence, and usually a winner and a loser. We are also tribal creatures: we like to know the culture of the people we are with, to feel comfortable with them, to understand the rules and the boundaries. So this text is not really surprising.

We know that the apostles were like struggled with jealousy: wanting to be the first and best. Wanting to be the greatest. Wanting Jesus' attention and special privileges. It's an essential part of their story: it comes up, often, in all four gospels.

It's an essential part of our story too. We are innately jealous. **When my twin daughters were little**, very little....too little to count, too little to talk, and I needed to make dinner, I'd prop them up in their high chairs and put cheerios on the tray for them to eat/play with. The first few times I did that, when I put a handful of the cereal on each tray, one of the girls would become agitated, start to cry. They couldn't count! But they KNEW when the other one had more. OK fine, I thought, and counted them out. Even with a cheerio in each hand so there was no moment when it was uneven. I knew how it was with twins. But guess what? Then they BOTH cried. They did NOT want to have the SAME number of cheerios....**each of them wanted to be the one who had MORE than the other**. This, my friends, is human nature. We all want to be the one who in some way has MORE. To be the one who is RIGHT. And so we, like Jesus' apostles, struggle against the ridiculous generosity that Jesus showed to....well, to everyone. Even to his enemies. Even to the people who seemed to be taking advantage of him. Even to the undeserving! Even, we hope, we pray, to us, when we are being small minded and try to limit the power of the Kingdom of God.

I believe in bringing my questions to the text to see what it is saying, so here are some for this story:

First: Why did the apostles react they did? The complaint about the nameless disciple, not part of their group, casting out demons in Jesus' name, comes from the apostles' desire to have exclusive rights to bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to their world. Their understanding of what they were doing was territorial, and this exorcist – who didn't just claim to cast out demons but used Jesus' name-- and succeeded—seemed to the apostles to be invading their turf. I think we would feel the same way. I know I struggle because I have felt that way at times.

Second: Why did Jesus respond as he did? They wanted him to say, yes this is your work alone, my chosen ones, and nobody else's. But that is NOT what Jesus said, and that is NOT how following Jesus works. *"No one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me."* In other words, people who are successfully accomplishing the work of the Master in the Master's name and under his authority are making and honoring a commitment to Christ. Doing the authentic *deeds* of good news under the power of Christ implies *dedication* to the source of good news.

Jesus also said, *"Whoever is not against us is for us."* Now, this needs to be seen in context. Jesus is not giving a general blessing to anything and everything that is not actively working against his mission. This is not a, *"live and let live,"* type comment. It is not "anything goes" or

an abandonment of standards. In fact, it underscores what the standard really needs to be. In the context of this story and this chapter in Mark, Jesus is telling his followers, *"Anyone (like the man you tried to stop) who is accomplishing the work of God, whether a part of our particular group or not, is in partnership with what we are doing."* There are other occasions in the New Testament, where people who claim to be working in Christ's are challenged because what they are doing is inconsistent with the principles that Jesus practiced and taught. Those actions were self-interested and selfish. They preached hate in the name of God. They condemned people and shut them out forever instead of loving them as they were and welcoming them in.

That leads right into question number three: What does this passage mean for us? What does it mean if we change from seeing things in terms of THEM and US, with correct practice, credentials, language, or cultural norms as the standard we apply? What if instead we acknowledge in our hearts and minds and deeds that in fact, we are all ONE in Christ, with the standard of dedication to Jesus and doing the authentic work of God as the unifying principle? We would have to let go of some feelings of our own special-ness, just as Jesus told his apostles they would have to do. Not that there aren't standards: there are. Not everyone who invokes the name of God is actually serving God. The test, of course, is to ask if what is being done reflects the teachings of Jesus, the standards of GRACE, LOVE, COMPASSION AND RECONCILIATION—the priorities of the Kingdom of God. Jesus reeled his apostles back in to that standard and he is still reeling us in, when we wander into exclusive, judgmental beliefs and think our view, our way, is the only way.

Everyone is called where they are, to bring what they are to the work of the Kingdom. James and John were fishermen, Matthew was a tax collector, Paul was a religious professional who opposed everything Christian. Each one encountered Christ and made the decision to follow the Master in a unique way. One can imagine people who followed the Apostle Paul insisting that the only true way to meet Christ would be to ride a horse to Damascus until a bright light knocks you off the horse. But if they—and we—get too focused on creating certain conditions, we may miss God in action in our lives right here, right now!

Lastly, what else is there here? So here are some final thoughts.

The apostles encountered the exorcist invoking Jesus' name and tried to stop him, but they could not. The work of the gospel is unstoppable, unstoppable by those who would twist it, and unstoppable by those who insist there is only one right way.

The man who was driving out evil in the name of Christ was successful in ministry even though he was not one of the twelve or even one of the seventy or any other "named" person in the New Testament. Yet, he was out there following Christ and working for Christ in the power of Christ.

What a great example for us. We may not be well known. We may feel like we have little to offer, or that others are so much better at being holy.... but **there is no such thing as an insignificant disciple in the eyes of Christ**. In spite of the fact that some who followed Christ told the man to stop, his ministry went on.

There is more than one way to follow Jesus, and the proof of our discipleship is in the work that is done, the caring, the sharing, the feeding, the clothing, the compassion and reconciliation. And when we do that work, calling upon Christ to guide us through the power of the Spirit, we can truly be the community, the church, which God calls us to be. Salt and light for a needy world.

Or as Jesus tells his followers—tells US! We should be salt, seasoning up the whole world with the flavor of the Jesus life. We should be light, driving away the darkness with our love and care. We should NOT listen to our fears that tempt us to hunker down and close up in to a little gang of the righteous. We are meant to get out there, even when it's scary, even when it's risky. Maybe especially in those times, when we have to leave behind the former ways, the temptation to be exclusive, the desire to be insiders, and instead dare in faith step out to live and act in the world, the Body of Christ, proclaiming good news for all people.