

Someone is casting out demons in Jesus' name who isn't part of Jesus' own circle, and the disciples want him stopped. They appeal to Jesus, as Joshua did to Moses about the elders who prophesied without official authorization. Like Moses, Jesus refuses to see this as a threat. Jesus welcomes good being done in his name, even when it is not under his control.

The circle we form around Jesus' word must be able to value good being done in ways we wouldn't do it, by people we can't keep tabs on.

Who can claim Jesus?

- Neither Eldad, Medad, nor the exorcist claimed the Spirit for themselves.
- Eldad and Medad did not come to Moses and demand to be elders.
- The exorcist did not argue with Jesus to be authorized as an apostle.

Our good news is that God pours out the Spirit on people somehow free of the need for recognition, desire for greatness, and selfish ambition evident in Mark's portrait of the apostles. Remember **Jesus warned against** seeking greatness for yourself, last Sunday and he pointed to humility.

We need to ponder the righteousness of God and the risks we commit ourselves to:

- if we fail to love and forgive,
- if we distort the way of Christ to meet our own needs,
- if we have too narrow of an understanding of the truth, and
- if we rush to pronounce judgment on others that turn out to be roadblocks to those who would enter Jesus' community as they try to find the way of faithful living.

Beware of creating stumbling blocks for others, who might approach Jesus from an angle that you do not know or claim in your limited experience.

For Jesus is right: given a choice, most who love Jesus would gladly head down to the sea with a millstone around their neck, or cut off their hand, or tear out their eye, or cut out their tongue than live in the hell of causing a little one, who believed in Jesus and was entrusted to them, to stumble.

Jesus is warning you and me about stumbling blocks? *One obstacle* identified in our texts is jealousy and a selfish desire for control.



- Notice the initial response of the young man and Joshua in the text from Numbers. Both are trying to stop Eldad and Medad from speaking the word of the Lord. Moses asks, “Are you jealous for my sake?”
- Notice the disciple John from the gospel text, “.... we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” Just before this moment the disciples had erupted into an argument about who is the greatest disciple.

Jealously among believers takes many shapes.

- Can we outwork one another and thus demonstrate how much we really love Jesus?
- Can we carry our social justice banner higher than our neighbor and thus prove we are more righteous?
- Can we put our hands to service in such a way as to hinder the movement of the spirit because we think it is our work?

This attitude weaves its way into our lives when we compete with family members and/or compare ourselves to one another asking if we are better or bigger or more effective in building the kingdom of God. The sin festers and infects as we grow jealous.

Is this the “**greener grass theory?**” In effect, we trip over jealousy, breed an unhealthy competitive spirit, and poison cooperative ministries. The central sin is believing it is *our* ministry. Clearly it is not. God shares the work of God’s kingdom with all who are willing to do our Lord’s work. How can we cut off jealous competitiveness?

Our faith walk is a collective journey. It is not a race to the top. We are not exercising only for ourselves, but for the body of Christ, for the witness to God’s world.

On this final day of September 2018 Jesus affirms the good being done in his name, even when it’s out of his control. For those of us with control issues we are reminded that so much good, so much ministry, goes on in our congregations and communities ***in a way we might not do it, by people we don’t even know.***

Mark contains some of the more heart-breaking lines in Scripture: “And we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”



Pause and think about that for a moment. The disciples come across someone who, as they report to Jesus, was “casting out demons in your name.” That is, they came across someone who was relieving intense misery, following Jesus’ example and doing so in Jesus’ name. Remember: **What was** Jesus’ first act of power? He cast out demons.

It’s interesting that John, the disciple making the report, seems to expect Jesus’ approval. He is not asking a question, “*should* we have stopped him?” But rather offers an almost matter-of-fact account: “And we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

Far from giving his stamp of approval, however, Jesus corrects John and the others: “*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.*”

It’s almost as if the disciples don’t realize how significant or challenging their mission is, and Jesus admonishes them to find and accept help wherever they can. But then he goes further, saying: “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.”

Notice what a small, example Jesus uses.

In a mere sentence, Jesus has gone from talking about “deeds of power” to “giving someone a cup of water.” Strikingly, that small gesture alone, according to Jesus, is enough to secure one’s reward. In Faith: Power yields to service.

Mark is re-telling this scene from Jesus’ ministry to help deal with some of the internal conflicts with which his own community was struggling. We don’t know quite what the dividing lines were –

1. gnostic vs. orthodox views of Jesus, or
2. those who suffered persecution in Jesus name vs. those who abandoned the faith and now wanted to come back, etc. – we know that there were significant divisions among the followers of Jesus

Mark invites his diverse and conflicted parishioners into Jesus’ story to reframe how they think about their lives, their commitments, their identity, and their vision



of what constitutes authentic Christian community. ***Faith should not divide ... rather it should act as a multiplier.***

The church has not escaped polarization but rather it has allowed itself to be defined almost entirely by the terms of the current political climate.

Christian leaders on the left and right – *notice how hard it is to even have this conversation without using labels from the political context?* – set the standards of what constitutes genuine faith: “You cannot be a Christian if you...” (here, fill in the blank):

- voted for Donald Trump - didn't vote for Donald Trump, are pro-choice, or are pro-life, aren't LGBTQ-friendly, or you advocate for LGBTQ rights.

It doesn't take long to realize that both sides serve as mirror twins of the other, not by any means in their convictions, simply in allowing their convictions to serve as the criteria by which to determine whether another person can bear the name of Christ.

In other words, each side could easily say, “And we tried to stop him because he was not following us,” all the while singing a corrupted, but perhaps more honest, version of Marty Haugen's beloved hymn: “All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome...unless you disagree with us.”

God cares about our politics and our economics, ethnicity, environment, gender and sexuality. Indeed, if we recall that the root of the word “politics” is the Greek *polis* – “people” – then *it's vitally important to affirm **Luther's conviction that God is at work in our political and governmental structures to care for God's people.***

The challenge is to be non-partisan.

- That is, can we imagine that God is at work in and through someone who bears the name of Christ but disagrees with us profoundly on an issue that is important to us?
- Can we make room in our worship and fellowship for those who disagree with us without labelling them?
- Can we try to stop, at least for a moment, trying to convince someone else of why they are wrong – or, worse, condemning because they believe



differently than we do – and try to understand what experiences have shaped those views?

- Can we imagine that given the enormity of the challenges in front of us, there may be good ideas coming from persons who hold different perspectives and commitments than we do?
- Can we accept a cup of cold water from someone who does not follow us?

This does not mean that you surrender your convictions, but rather it challenges you exercise “empathetic imagination” to try to know, understand, and even respect those with whom you disagree.

Engage in genuine conversation. (This may mean you will have to learn how to turn your personal “defensive reaction button off.”) This requires an intentional move made by you.

There are few spaces in our world and culture right now that create space for genuine conversation where each party takes on the responsibility to be able to hear and describe the beliefs of the other person,

- where heartfelt engagement doesn’t devolve into partisan name-calling, and
- where respectful while also spirited disagreement that refuses to give up on the inherent worth and dignity of those in an opposing party.

Will the church be that kind of safe place? Will our congregation? “Lord, help us not be a stumbling block to the work your direct each person to do in your name. Help us see you – even in the stranger ... Guide us to follow our heart and help us learn to love the stranger, for we do not know when we entertain angels unawares.

AMEN

