

Proper 21, Year B

September 27, 2015

Mark 9:38-48 *John said to Jesus, "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 afterward 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. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*

Fr. John Shea describes a conference he once attended. The participants at the conference were divided into small groups for discussion, and within the small groups they were divided into pairs. Fr. Shea was paired with an Hispanic man. Their first instruction was to tell about each other -- to get to know one another. Discerning that his partner was a little reluctant to initiate the sharing, Fr. Shea offered to begin. He told the date and place of his birth, related a little about his childhood, what brought him into the priesthood, the fact that he lived in Chicago and taught theology at a Roman Catholic University. After he had finished telling about himself, Fr. Shea warmly and encouragingly invited his partner to tell about *him*self. The man began: "In 1585, my people came to this land..."

We Americans are very steeped in American individualism. When *we* are asked about who we are -- our identity -- we begin with our own personal history -- *my* story: my birth, my personal experience, character traits, interests, hobbies, occupation. We *may* mention our parents and siblings, our spouse and children -- our *immediate* family -- but that is the extent that we think about mentioning others when we are told to tell about ourselves. What a different perspective Fr. Shea's Hispanic partner had! "In 1585, my people..." *His* identity was linked to a much larger group, a much larger family and extended family, which included both the living and the dead, people whom he personally knew and people whom he did not know. *Together* they all gave him his self-definition.

Biblical scholars Malina and Rohrbaugh explain that the society in which Jesus lived was *not* the individualistic society with which you and I are so familiar. They write: "In contemporary American society the question 'Who are you?' is a question about what uniquely characterizes an individual. It is a question that only the individual can really answer. In collectivist societies, however, identity normally derives from, and traces back to, the **group** in which one is embedded. One is 'of Nazareth,' or 'of Cyrene,' identifying the place [or] community in which identity resides. At a more specific level, one is 'son of Joseph,' or 'son of Abraham'. Thus *identity* is **family** identity." (Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 43)

Jesus was bucking this culture when he called Peter and Andrew and James and John *away* from their families, their primary group in that culture, and re-defined their identities in relationship to himself. Their primary identities are *now* “disciples of Jesus of Nazareth”. It is no wonder, then, that Jesus’ disciples feel threatened when an unknown exorcist comes around casting out demons *in the name of Jesus*. This exorcist does not belong to their group! It’s all the *more* threatening if we remember that earlier on in this same chapter of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ disciples were themselves *unable* to cast out a demon (9:18), and yet here this “alien” exorcist seems to be *successful* in casting out demons – and *in the name of Jesus*!

As much as we Americans *are* individuals, and most of us do not start our stories by saying, “In 1585, my people...”, nonetheless we *can* form very strong group identities. We are Republicans or Democrats, Episcopalians or Presbyterians, Rite I or Rite II Episcopalians. We have license plates that tell others we are veterans or fire-fighters, bumper-stickers that identify us as Broncos fans, alums of CU or CSU. I remember once having a conversation with a resident of the “hi-rise” here in Canon City, who spoke in less-than-glowing terms about “those people on the fifth floor”. If you are honest with yourself, you can undoubtedly identify any number of categories of which *you* are either a member of the “in” group or the “out” group. Rudyard Kipling wrote:

“All the people like us are We,
And everyone else is They.”

We all long to belong -- belong to some group, belong to some community that gives us identity. But if there are *members* of a group, there are also those who are *not* members. If you identify yourself strongly as a native of Colorado, then a person from Mississippi is not part of your group. If you identify yourself strongly as an Episcopalian, then a Methodist is not part of your group. “All the people like us are We, And everyone else is They.”

But in today’s Gospel, Jesus goes against this strongly-held attitude: “Do not stop [the outside exorcist from casting out demons in my name],” he tells his disciples. “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

That is a *radical* re-defining of who is “in” and who is “out.”

What causes this tendency of us human beings to polarize -- to draw lines between “in” and “out”, “the good guys” and “the bad guys”? Pastor Philip Bauman suspects that part of our “issue” is that we all want to be accepted and loved and affirmed, and yet we fear that love is in limited supply. He writes: “We live our lives as though God only has a limited amount of love to dole out to each person, that God might just run out of love for us... As Henri Nouwen has noted, we cannot *comprehend* the fact that God has an **infinite** supply of love for us, and that it is possible for **all** of us to be special in God’s eyes. *My* being special to God does not preclude *you* from being special as well.” (*Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. 11, #10, p.29) Yet in our humanness, we seem to *have* to have somebody who is NOT special in order for us to believe that *we are*. Somebody must be “out” if *we* are to be “in.”

But Jesus defines “out” and “in” in a very different way.

The alien exorcist in no way threatens Jesus’ work by healing in his name. Indeed, he is *doing*

Jesus' work of healing, even though he isn't a disciple of Jesus! The only threat the outsider poses is to the *exclusive* status which the disciples claim for themselves. But Jesus is not concerned about obstacles to his disciples' *status*; rather, he is concerned with *obstacles to the flow of the Holy Spirit*.

In fact, upon reflection we can see that our whole Gospel passage today is about obstacles blocking the flow of the Holy Spirit. First, Jesus tells us **not** to put obstacles in the way of other people who are not part of our "in-group" but who are allowing the Spirit to flow through their lives; and then Jesus has us look inside our own hearts, in order to remove the obstacles that keep the Holy Spirit from flowing through **our** lives. For it is the Spirit's nature to *flow*, from God the Father into God the Son and through the Son to flow into us and through us into others and back to God. Indeed, in this Gospel passage Jesus uses some of the harshest language in all his teaching to warn against putting obstacles in the way of the flow of the Holy Spirit, either through the lives of others, or within our own interior lives – our own heart and soul. If someone were to place an obstacle in the way of the flow of the Spirit through others, it would be better, Jesus says, that a millstone be hung around his neck and he be cast into the sea. If your hand is the obstacle blocking the flow of the Holy Spirit, cut it off; if your eye, pluck it out; if your foot, cut it off." Jesus says elsewhere it is the sin **against** the Holy Spirit that cannot be forgiven; St. Paul warns, "do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God..." (Ephesians 4:30) and "Do not quench the Spirit." (1 Thessalonians 5:19) Why such an emphasis on allowing the flow of the Holy Spirit? Because that is how we participate in the life of God, in the life of the Holy Trinity, which is the life we were created to live! And it is this participation in God – all of us – that makes us whole inside ourselves and united with one another, those who are obviously part of our group and those who seem **not** to be, though in a larger perspective they actually are.

In reading a little yesterday about what Pope Francis has said during his visit here in the United States, one thing that jumped out at me was what he said as he greeted the crowd of people gathered outside the Capitol Building after his speech to Congress. Standing on a balcony of the Capitol Building, he said to the crowds below, "I ask you all please to pray for me. And if there are among you any who do not believe or cannot pray, I ask you to please send good wishes my way." In this seemingly benign request, what Pope Francis was actually doing was spreading his arms out to include in his own "in group" non-believers and atheists. He used a term that non-believers could accept – "good wishes" – but he was asking nothing different from these non-believers than he was from faithful Christians. He was saying to them all, in language they could accept, "Please funnel the flow of the Spirit through your life in my direction."

You see, in the life of the Holy Trinity, then, Kipling's couplet is proven wrong; for in truth, "All the people like us are We, And everyone else – is We, also." That's what Pope Francis was affirming in his disarmingly simple request asking *prayers* from the faithful and *good wishes* from unbelievers.

"Whoever is not against us is for us." Our "in-group" is always much larger than we imagine, for in the Holy Spirit – or whatever word you may use to describe the same divine person or reality – we are all one.

AMEN