

Proper 21, Year B

September 30, 2018

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 *himself*. The man began: "In 1585, my people came to this land..."¹

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, my character traits, interests, hobbies, occupation.

Biblical scholars Malina and Rohrbaugh, who are also social scientists, 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... 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."²

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 – he is not a literal follower of Jesus! 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 “outsider” who is *successful* in casting out demons – *in the name of Jesus!* (And remember, “in the name of” means “in the character or spirit of.”)

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 Christians or Muslims, Republicans or Democrats, Episcopalians or Methodists, Coloradans or Texans. We have license plates that tell others we are veterans or pioneers or fire-fighters, bumper-stickers that identify us as Broncos fans, alums of CU or CSU. Why do we have to proclaim our group identities to the world by posting them on our vehicles? Now, I’m not saying that group identities are necessarily bad; but they become dangerous when they are imbued with ultimate importance. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, “Whoever loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” Rudyard Kipling wrote:

“All nice people like us are We,
And everyone else is They.”³

We all long to belong -- belong to some group, belong to some community that gives us identity and shared purpose. 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 Texas is not part of your group. If you identify yourself strongly as a Democrat, then a Republican is not part of your group – and *vice versa*. “All nice 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.”

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 literal follower 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, I would suggest, he is concerned with *obstacles to the flow of the Holy Spirit*.

You see, I believe 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.” (Of course, Jesus is using the rabbinic technique of hyperbole.) Jesus says elsewhere it is the sin **against** the Holy Spirit that cannot be forgiven (Mark 3:28-30); 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* 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 reality they are.

In his first visit to the United States, Pope Francis greeted a large crowd of people gathered outside the Capitol Building after his speech to Congress. Standing on a balcony, 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 Kipling’s couplet is proven wrong; for in truth, “All nice 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.

Our “in-group” is always much larger than we imagine, for in the Holy Spirit – or whatever word your group uses to describe the same divine person or reality – we are all one.

AMEN

¹ *Citation lost*

² Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 43

³ "We and They" by Rudyard Kipling