

***“Who Gets To?”***

BMW is *“The ultimate driving machine.”* You choose Hallmark *“When you care enough to send the very best”* *“You can see this only on NBC!”* because it is *“Must see TV!”* Advertisers all claim their product to be the best! Companies love to have the one and only, true blue, “you can only get it here,” exclusive on the products they sell. And all the more so if the product is really popular. Most of us could name the company that came up with this great slogan: *“... it’s the real thing!”* which implies that all others are just kind of real, in other words: fake.

You would think that the Christian Church would be free from this kind of boasting — or would you? Jostling for position or berating the competition is not fitting for a community which claims to follow Jesus Christ and where humility and a gentle spirit are highly valued. But think for a moment. Do you ever hear words like this from people in one church or another (or maybe you’ve seen them on a sign out front?): *“We’re the real thing! (All others are false!)”* *“We worship best at First Church!”* *“The truth is spoken here!”*

Today’s gospel has an absolutely stunning insight into the source of much strife in the Christian community. Listen carefully to the words again: ***“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”***

Did you catch all of that? Why did Jesus’ followers try to stop the man who was doing his work in the name of Jesus? Was it because he was not doing the right kind of work? No. Was it perhaps that he was not a good representative of the work of God? No. Could it have been that the person he was helping was not deserving? Double No!!

Why would the disciples want to stop someone from working in the name of Jesus? When they come to Jesus with their report, they were already on shaky ground; in fact, they came without grounds. They couldn’t say, *“Lord we saw a man of ill repute working in your name so we tried to*

*stop him.*” Nor could they say, *“Lord we saw a man doing a good work, but he was doing it in the name of a pagan god, so we tried to stop him.”* If we can gain insight into this incident, we will gain insight into the sometimes troubled world of relationships between Christians and their churches.

Let’s look first at the exorcist — the man who was casting out demons.

Whoever this was, he was doing what he was doing in the name of Jesus. In other words, he believed in the person and the power of Jesus and was doing his work under Jesus’ authority. When the disciples report that he was working *“ . . . in your name ”* they imply that the man was working under the authority of Jesus.

The second thing we know about the man is that he was not one of the inner circle of twelve and apparently not one of the seventy Luke told us Jesus had sent out to do his work. This is a nameless disciple. This lets us know that even nameless disciples can do powerful things when they act *“ . . . in the name of Jesus. ”*

The third thing we know about this nameless disciple is that he was apparently successful at what he was doing — and this is quite likely where the rub began.

Now let’s look at the Twelve and their motives.

Earlier in the ninth chapter of Mark there is an incident that would have been quite fresh in the disciples’ minds. Jesus had been on the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James and John. The other nine disciples had remained behind, at the base of the mountain. When Jesus and the three came down from the mountain, there was a bit of a flurry of activity going on with the disciples and a crowd of people. A group of scribes were arguing with the disciples. Here’s how Mark tells the story: *“[Jesus] asked them, ‘What are you arguing about with them?’ Someone from the crowd answered him, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and*

***becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.***” [Mark 9:16-18] A few verses later, when the crowd is gone and the disciples are alone with Jesus, they asked Him about their failure and Jesus gave them an answer. ***“When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’”*** [Mark 9:28-29]

Does this clear things up a bit? No? There is a certain poignancy in their question. It is difficult enough to be unsuccessful in front of your teacher, but to be unsuccessful when someone who isn’t even ***“following us”*** is successful can be a bitter pill. Not only that, but there is an implication here that the nameless disciple is doing better with his prayer life than they are.

The key difficulty with the disciples’ report to Jesus is that their complaint about the nameless disciple is based solely on their desire to have an exclusive right to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to their world. It was a territorial issue and this exorcist — this especially successful exorcist — was invading their turf.

There is one additional rub. The way Mark reports the story, the disciples were not even successful in stopping the man! ***“We tried to stop him,”*** they say to Jesus. The work of God went on in spite of the disciple’s interference.

Now let’s consider Jesus’ response to the disciples. Jesus enjoins the disciples not to stop this man (and the implication is: anyone like this man), and He gives them two reasons or insights into those who do the work of God without necessarily being in our particular community of faith. ***“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 unlikely to turn away from their commitment. Doing the deeds of good news under the power of Christ implies dedication to the source of that good news.

Then He adds: ***“Whoever is not against us is for us.”*** That statement 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. In this context, Jesus is saying, *“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 several lessons in this episode which apply directly to us and to the work of our church.

The words of the disciples to Jesus are the beginning point of understanding where Christian leaders and churches can get sidetracked. ***“. . . we tried to stop him because he was not following us.”*** The central allegiance of every Christian and every Christian community is to follow Jesus Christ. We err when we follow someone other than Christ, even when the other person tells us that to follow them is to follow Christ. We also err when we assume that all who follow Christ will follow Christ as we do. James and John were fishermen. Matthew was a tax collector. Paul was a religious professional who opposed everything Christian. Each one encountered Christ and wound up following the Master in a unique way. I can imagine that there were 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 your saddle.

Jesus said, ***“I am the way the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except by Me.”*** [John 14:6] You may have to untangle this a bit, but most divisions in the church come when people are of the attitude, *“My way is THE way to the Way.”* The task is not to make people into Lutherans — or Presbyterians, or Evangelicals, or “Epicalopians” (as my grandfather called them) . . . the task is to bring people to Christ. The Apostle Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians when he writes, ***“. . . it has been reported to me . . . that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’***

***Has Christ been divided?*** [1:11-13]

A second lesson in our text is really good news. The man who was combating evil in the name of Christ was successful in ministry even though he is an “unknown.” He is not one of the Twelve or even one of the seventy or any other “named” person in the New Testament. Yet, he is out there following Christ and working for Christ in the power of Christ. What a great example for you and me. We may not be well known or what historians will call a “pillar of the church,” 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.

If we are to avoid making serious mistakes in saying who is and who is not an authentic follower of Christ, we will need to have a “Gamalian” attitude. Gamaliel was the man in the book of Acts who counseled the Jewish authorities concerning the followers of Jesus: “. . . ***I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them — in that case you may even be found fighting against God!***” [Acts 5:38-39] There is more than one way to follow Christ and the proof of “followership” or discipleship is in the Gospel work that is done.

There is one more crucial issue. One of the strong themes in the gospel story is the fact of human sinfulness. This was most uncomfortable for the disciples to have to admit. The fact was, a nameless disciple was able to do something in the name and in the power of Christ that they were unable to do (he was casting out demons, note the plural!). There is more than just a hint of envy that lies “between the lines” of our text.

Sometimes, we just plain don’t like it that someone else succeeds where we fail. That’s human nature; or more correctly, sinful human nature. It takes a good degree of spiritual maturity to be able to recognize this envy streak in ourselves and in our institutions when it comes to who is really accomplishing something for Christ!

Some years ago, I attended a workshop for area pastors on church growth. Much of the discussion in that workshop had to do with what was wrong with growing churches, how they were perhaps compromising the gospel. Most of it seemed rooted in envy or defensiveness rather than honest insight. It continues today. My classmate, Mike Ernst, a while back retired as the Senior Pastor of the largest congregation in Synod (some 8,500 and growing). He has told me on more than one occasion of the kinds of attacks leveled against him and his congregation. You should know that Mike is one of the more conservative pastors in our District; but because his congregation is growing, he has been subjected to all kinds of calumny.

It is through prayer, Jesus told His disciples, that the tough battles of faith are won. In prayer, we open ourselves to the light of God where envy or jealousy can be examined and jettisoned in favor of eagerness for the success of the good news and rejoicing that the power of Christ is able to overcome evil. In prayer, we connect to the power that Jesus Himself wielded, and that the Holy Spirit continues to give to Christ's people. In prayer, we position ourselves to be receptive to this power, and to the guidance of that same Spirit. In prayer we walk with Christ, talk with Christ, hear from Christ, grow in Christ.

It is my prayer today that our gracious God will give each of us courage to follow Christ and grace to rejoice with all who work for Christ in a world in need of the good news of God. No one of us has exclusive rights to the gospel! Anyone who is moved by the Spirit gets to serve Him . . . even you.

Amen.