

Delegating Exorcisms

Mark 9:38-41

September 27, 2015

Rev. Pen Peery

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

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.'

+++

There are a lot of things that the 18 people you elect to be Deacons and Elders will be learning in the next couple of months. You see, after you vote for these people to be your officers in the church, it is the pastors' job to train them on what is needed to be an effective leader.

So we will teach this group about Reformed theology. And about how Presbyterians read the Bible. And about how our church is governed. And about how the church operates. We will spend time talking about our vision for the church – how we will listen for God's call for us to be "For Christ in the Heart of Charlotte."

But one thing I am pretty confident we will not spend much time on is training these new officers in the art of performing an exorcism.

Maybe it is just me, but exorcisms are one of those things I tend to gloss right over when I read the Bible. It's kind of like believing the world was created in seven, calendar days. There are just parts of the Scripture that I chalk up to a pre-modern understanding of the world – when people didn't have the benefit of the science that informs so much of our thinking.

So, yeah – maybe when the Bible talks about exorcisms or "casting out demons" – maybe that is just the way the Bible talks about people with mental illness. Nowadays, we use pharmaceuticals and talk-therapy to perform, quote, "exorcisms." That seems to be a much more humane and dignified method than laying on hands and commanding demons to come out of someone, right?

Except...a lot of times when Jesus, or someone else, casts out a demon...does whatever it is they do when they perform the exorcism...the thing that comes out isn't just a better balance of chemicals in the brain, but something physical...something that cries out...and something that tends to recognize the

power of Jesus to overwhelm evil with good, darkness with light, hate with love, death with life.

All of that to say, as much as I would love to sweep all of these mentions about demon possession and exorcism out of the way with a wave of my modern, enlightened hand, I'm not sure it is that simple. And I don't really know what to make of these stories...but it sure seems like Jesus must have spent time teaching his disciples a thing or two about exorcisms, because they were expected to practice them, and practice them well.

+ + +

For Jesus' disciples, it doesn't seem like witnessing a demon possession or an exorcism is a big deal. It's almost as if it is routine. But what is a big deal, at least to the disciple named John, is that someone else other than Jesus' band of disciples were performing these exorcisms.

"Teacher," John tattled, "we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

Now, John may have thought that his concern had to do with protecting Jesus, but his pronoun usage betrayed him.

John isn't concerned about protecting the name of Jesus – he isn't concerned about a malpractice suit for this unauthorized exorcism. John is concerned about John – and about his place in the inner circle.

John is concerned that if other people who haven't had the training he has had, or spent the time with Jesus, as he had done, if those people were out doing exorcisms in Jesus' name...well, there was no telling what might become of this movement that he had committed his life to pursue.

"Teacher, we tried to stop him because he was not following us..."

Have you ever had the inclination to say that or think that about someone else doing something in Jesus' name?

I spent three years and thousands of dollars going to seminary, taking classes, studying for and passing ordination exams, and submitting myself to an oral examination before about 300 other pastors and elders. And, I'll confess it!, when I see pastors with limited education and no formal training acting as spokespeople for Christianity it about drives me crazy. It makes me feel like Brother John...I only wish I could stop them.

Do you know who Joel Osteen is? Big smile. Really positive. Not a lot to challenge you to think about beyond yourself and your own improvement. Joel Osteen is the

pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas...the nation's largest Protestant church. They number their members in the tens of thousands and they beam their worship services around the world...including on Chanel 9 right here in Charlotte, NC, where we broadcast our worship service. Well, a few weeks ago I learned that – within our media market – our ratings on Sunday morning beat those of Joel Osteen...and oooooo, I have to confess, I am sinfully proud!

I'm kind of kidding. I don't want – or need – for our church to compete with Lakewood Church in Houston over who has the best ratings. But I do find myself spending what is probably too much time worrying about what other Christians who are not like us might do in the name of Jesus Christ.

When I hear about churches that motivate their members to action by scaring them into faith so as to avoid eternal punishment, I get a little uneasy.

When I see a church make headlines for a city-wide mission day, and I know that the same church refuses to recognize the place of women as leaders in the church, it pushes my buttons.

I think it is one of the more universal sins of a disciple – to believe that the people with whom we are associated in this Christian enterprise have to pass our litmus tests:

- about their core beliefs
- or their pedigrees
- or their politics
- or their lack of hypocrisy
- or their experience
- or their demonstrated commitment to the particular cause...

But Jesus seems absolutely unconcerned about our need to associate with other, like-minded disciples.

“Do not stop them,” Jesus said.
“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

+ + +

It's not that Jesus is oblivious to the nuances of the various groups of people who do ministry in his name. I think the root of Jesus' rebuke of John has to do with Jesus' awareness of the magnitude of the work that confronts any and all who consider themselves to be disciples.

There's just too much at stake to be worried about whose brand of Christianity gets credit, or whether the carefully constructed boundaries that separate our flavor of Christianity from another will hold up when we work side by side.

We've got 22% of children in our country who live in poverty – which includes 40% of children of color.

We've got radical fundamentalists indulging a violent rage in the cradle of civilization in the Middle East – a rage that is targeting any and all people of faith – including Christians – who fall outside of the narrow and perverted brand of Islam practiced by those who are committing these acts of terror.

We've got public schools that reflect the broken state of our communities – in that they are concentrated in terms of race and economics – which gives some children a pathway to success and others a preordained journey to poverty.

We've got an addiction to more. More money. More stuff. More security. More influence.

These are problems that threaten and confound us – because they seem so large, so overwhelming, and so important to solve.

I began this sermon talking about exorcisms – and, I think, strange as it sounds, maybe that is what we need.

Because some of the things that face us go beyond any strategy we might summon up to solve the problem. Some of the things we face – as people of faith, as a city, as a nation, as global citizens – some of what we face is insidious. That is, evil. There are things that are out of our control – beyond our reach – past the place of our influence.

And that is what drives us to our knees – to acknowledge that truth that we so often try to forget – that we cannot go it alone. That we are limited by our humanity. That we are utterly dependent upon God's grace.

That only the one whom God sent to reconcile the world to himself can accomplish the good that we ultimately seek.

+ + +

There are things – in us and in our culture – that need to be cast out. Exorcised.

Who invokes the name of Jesus doesn't matter.

It only matters that we recognize that none other than Jesus can make this world whole.