

First Presbyterian Church  
September 30, 2012  
Rev. Pen Peery

## **Open Sourcing**

Mark 9:38-41  
September 30, 2012

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 to soon afterward 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.”

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Today’s passage is a short one, so I want to make sure that we all know what has gone on just before our reading picked up.

Earlier in this chapter, the disciples – who had been given the ability and the authority by Jesus to cast out demons – those disciples fail at the task. The father of a boy in desperate need of an exorcism...after striking out with the disciples...then begs for Jesus to do what the disciples could not.

Instead of buckling down to figure out just how they might be more effective as the hands and feet of the Jesus they were following, what do the disciples do next? They spend their time locked in an argument about who was the greatest.

In response, an exasperated Jesus moves beyond words to lift up a child as the example of what it means to serve. “Whoever wants to be first,” says Jesus, “must be last of all and servant of all...”

All of which brings us to today’s passage where we meet a disciple named John.

John doesn’t play the leading role too often in Mark’s gospel. Normally, his is a supporting actor. In fact, what happens in today’s passage is really John’s one moment with the spotlight focused only on him. Rather than seizing the opportunity, John squanders it with this:

“Jesus...we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because *he was not following us.*”

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What is it with Jesus’s disciples using that line?

*He was not following us.*

*They are just not like us.*

*Can you believe they call themselves a church?*

*Their theology is not Reformed.*

*Their worship is all about entertainment.*

*They are too traditional.*

*They are too evangelical.*

*Can you believe what they say they believe?*

*Do you think they even know what they believe?*

*They seem to worship their own history.*

*They have no history – they are just a cult of personality around the pastor.*

At various points in my life, I confess that I have made every one of those statements...and here’s the thing: I was talking about another church! About someone or some group within the Christian family! Not about some other faith, but about our own.

“Jesus...we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because *he was not following us...*”

There are more than 38,000 different denominations in our world. More than 38,000 different expressions of what it means to be the body of Christ. That number grows every year. On my more cynical days, I think that if we just wait long enough there might be as many denominations as there are Christians!

“Jesus...we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because *he was not following us.*”

Note the pronoun.

This week as I studied this passage, I was struck by just how quickly the followers of Jesus start confusing discipleship with membership. From the very beginning, with the original disciples...the followers of Jesus seem to be less concerned about the fruit of ministry than they are with just who is in the right group.

Is it at all surprising, then, that the body of Christ that is the Church universal is so often known by the fights that we have rather than the work that we do in Christ’s name?

For very truly, “we have always done it that way...”

\* \* \*

For those early disciples, what was lost by spending energy worrying about who qualified for legitimate membership in the Jesus club was a focus on the work that needed to be done in Jesus' name. In this chapter, that most pressing work was the work of exorcism...or casting out demons.

Brian Blount, the president of Union Presbyterian Seminary, helps shed some light on this task of discipleship:

“Demons caused all kinds of problems in the first century when Jesus walked on this earth,” says Blount. “[Demons] stole in and inhabited the human psyche. Then they drained all the human strength and personality they could find.

They were hostile, malignant, spiritual parasites. They took away the most precious thing a person has – his or her self. In its place they left a mean spirited, twisted, wrecking ball of psychological fury. Some of the demon possessed went crazy. Others went violently ill. Some died.

It is no wonder, then, that the exorcists of Jesus' day were in such high demand. In first century Palestine there was a bull-market on madness. That is one reason why Jesus was so popular in the gospel of Mark. He was an exorcist extraordinaire.

Jesus wields exorcism the way a soldier wields a sword. Exorcism is one of the most lethal weapons in Jesus' power arsenal of the reign of God.

According to Mark, it is a weapon Jesus shared with his disciples – and that's the point: the power to exorcise is a power Jesus gave to the entire church.

We are, all of us, exorcists here.”<sup>1</sup>

I know. To our modern, enlightened ears, all of this business about casting out demons and exorcism sounds like crazy talk. But ask yourself: what needs to be rooted out of our culture? What needs to be rooted out of our hearts? What problem, or hindrance, or evil is so thoroughly entrenched that it resists all of our best attempts to change it?

I think about racism;  
Or addiction;  
Or apathy;

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<sup>1</sup> Blount, Brian, “The Exorcist” (Sermon preached at Duke Chapel, 2009).

Or hatred;  
Or greed;  
Or idolatry...

All of which suck the life of people and society. All of which steal the human strength and personality from folks. All of which seem to have built up an immunity to withstand our best, human, efforts to weed them out of existence.

Could not we use some more churches with the power to exorcise the demons of our day?

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Perhaps this is why Jesus seems so open to sharing this incredible power: the work of discipleship is just too important to limit to one specific group.

That disciple named John doesn't see it. John displays a proprietary concern. He is worried about this unauthorized version of Jesus' ministry. He frets over copyright infringement.

All the while he lacks the courage, or the focus, or the faith, to do what this uncredentialed exorcist is able to do in Jesus' name.

"Anyone who is not against us is for us," Jesus says.

It has been my experience that that too many times the church of Jesus Christ gets that backwards.

"Anyone who is not against us is for us" becomes "anyone who is not like us is wrong."

I'm not suggesting that the differences within the Christian family are inconsequential. What makes a Presbyterian a Presbyterian or a Baptist a Baptist or a Catholic a Catholic are beliefs that are significant...and sometimes significantly different.

But are those differences – real as they may be – an excuse for not cooperating in the higher goal of discipleship?

To proclaim the good news of the gospel...a gospel that carries the power to heal the broken, root out evil, comfort the comfortless, and save the lost?

All across our city there are churches doing incredible work in Jesus' name.

There are hungry people being fed.

There are prisoners being visited.

There are poor people being valued.

In Jesus' name –

work is being done to liberate the oppressed,

efforts are being made to reach those searching for good news,  
the sick and the dying are being comforted.

By many measures, the churches doing this kind of ministry are not like us.  
Yet rather than viewing them through the lens of competition or  
condescension, what if we could imagine what it might look like to do what  
Jesus recommends at the end of today's passage: to offer them a cup of water  
in Christ's name for the work that they do?

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This week I spent some time reading about the history of our great church. I am  
intrigued that at our founding – in 1821 – this congregation was not Presbyterian,  
but was founded to be the city church for the newly incorporated town of Charlotte.

Goodness knows our city has changed since then. No one church can serve the  
spiritual or physical needs of a city as large and complex as ours. Yet I keep coming  
back to this idea of what it might look like to be a community of faith – a collection of  
disciples – who see it as their call to offer refreshment to all of those who are doing  
ministry in Jesus' name. I keep coming back to the foundations of our history and  
our mission as a congregation – to be a church for the city.

And I wonder: how might we partner with other churches – Methodist, Baptist, Non-  
Denominational, store-front, Presbyterian...yes, those kinds of Presbyterians and  
the other kinds...in our collective efforts to do ministry in Christ's name?

I wonder: could we establish a reputation as the church that is focused on  
encouraging other churches? As the church that is committed to being a resource  
and a compliment to the on-going and multi-faceted work of the gospel, regardless  
of the flavor of the Christian faith?

I am intrigued by how well this seems to fit our original mission – and I suspect we  
are already seen in this way by people who know something about us as an historic,  
center-city congregation.

The work of discipleship is urgent.  
It is not about who does it right or who gets the credit...because it is not about us.  
Our Presbyterian theology tells us as much.

We are not the ones who have the power to address and confront and exorcise the  
demons of our culture and our hearts – that kind of power can only come from the  
Triune God whom we know in Jesus Christ.

The God who is before us and behind.

The God who leads this world along the pathway of salvation.

And...get this....the God who shares this power through the vessel of Christ's body that is the church...in every expression and in every circumstance.

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