

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

There's an interesting sentence that kicks off today's gospel reading. It starts with one focus and ends with another. See if you can catch it: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in *your* name and we tried to stop him, because he was not following *us*." The pronouns shift. They go from "your name" to "not following us."

The disciples have identified someone who isn't part of their group but who is clearly doing amazing things in the name of Jesus. And how do they react? Are they celebrating the healing that's taking place? Rejoicing that the ill are made well by God? No. They are offended. I'm not quite sure why.

Maybe they think they alone have some singular entitlement to Jesus. Maybe this means having to share the limelight and the credit. President Harry Truman is credited with saying, "There's no limit to the amount of good we can do if we quit worrying about who gets the credit." Don't worry about who gets to be in the spotlight. Worry about what "good" needs to be done.

Perhaps they were afraid they would be displaced or replaced by someone and an outsider at that! After all they had just been arguing – only one or two verses earlier – about who among them was the greatest. And, presumably, who among them would be in charge after Jesus left. Remember he had been talking a lot lately about going "back to the father," whatever that meant. Clearly they didn't understand it meant crucifixion.

So their egos are wounded in some petty way. They want to draw lines around who is, or is not, following *us*. Because in good dualistic, ego-centric thinking, you are either with us or against us. You are for me or against me. There is no middle ground in dualistic thinking. "America: love it or leave it." If it is not all one thing completely, then it is all the diametric opposite.

Jesus turns this around. "No, boys. Whoever is not *against* us is *for* us, even if they are not walking *with* us at the moment." It's a major shift in thought and outlook. Those who are not against you are for you. Or at the very minimum, they are not in opposition to you. People who tend to think the way the disciples did that day have a habit of starting wars. They believe anyone who is not with them is a threat.

This is tribalism. Tribalism was a survival tactic for pre-verbal Human. To be suspicious of the unknown or different was a great way to stay alive. Back then. Today, it's a killer. *Suspicion of those who are not part of us or not exactly like us* is what lies at the heart of genocide or so-called "ethnic cleansing."

Jesus turned around the thinking of his disciples. Maybe he could do that for us today. Could we possibly say that whenever "good" is being done then it is of God? Even if it isn't done in the name of Christ? Understand that "good," with a capital "G," means that wherever

harm is being healed; pollution is being cleaned up; people and animals are kept from hunger; nations are moved to peace: these and much more are “good.”

Can we say that wherever “good” is, then God is, even if it isn’t Christian “good”? Maybe it’s a Jewish hospital. Maybe it’s a Hindu orphanage. Wherever there is good being done, God is there. That may be a stretch for some.

Here’s another stretch: Can we imagine that God is at work in and through a fellow Christian – perhaps even a fellow Episcopalian – who disagrees with us profoundly on an important issue? Abortion. Human sexuality. Immigrant policies. Can we make room in our worship and fellowship for those who disagree with us without sticking a label on them?

One way to make this happen is to stop mentally rehearsing all the arguments that prove we’re right. The fact is, there are life experiences that have shaped all those views that differ from mine. There may be good ideas coming from those who hold opposite perspectives from you. From me. God, the Holy Spirit, may be speaking through those perspectives. Can we hear them? Can we accept a cup of cold water from someone who does not follow us?

“*It would be better if you . . .*” Jesus says this little phrase four times today in rather gruesome detail. It would be better if you hung a millstone around your neck and drowned in the sea than to cause another to stumble. That is exceptionally severe language. Jesus is saying this to people he loves: dearly. He says it to us. He is very serious about this business of not causing another to stumble.

The number one commandment in the practice of medicine is “do no harm.” That should be the number one priority of being Human. Do no harm. Do not cause another to stumble. I like to think in terms of “do not blow out another’s light.” Because a lot of people out there only have a tiny little pilot light. Maybe they’re recovering from illness. Undergoing divorce. Job loss. Or just general life disappointment. Others are huge infernos of energy and insight and activity. Great! But don’t blow out someone’s pilot light.

A writer named Debie Thomas wrote an essay about the time she and her husband went through a rough patch in their marriage. The therapist they consulted offered this advice:

“What would it look like for each of you to help the *other person* succeed? Instead of calling out each other’s faults; instead of focusing only on your own comfort and rightness; instead of making an already hard road even harder for your partner to travel; what if you each committed to helping the other succeed? What if you cleared paths for

each other? Removed obstacles for each other? Helped each other towards success?”¹

Jesus isn't being literal in today's gospel passage. He does not want any of us killing ourselves with millstones. Do no harm: to ourselves or to others. But he persists in using strong language. “It would be better for you” to cut off a hand or foot, or to tear out an eye, than to live in hell. Or to live a hellish existence.

End an addiction. Forgive a family member. Make a significant lifestyle change. Say goodbye to a harmful relationship. Surrender a cherished point of view. All of these things can feel like death. Like drowning. Like losing an arm or leg. It *hurts* to change.²

The way of the cross entails change. We will pray in a few minutes for the desire to “walk in your ways and delight in your will” in our General Confession. Walk in God's ways. That entails change. And change is *hard*.

It is not God's will to make the way of the cross any more difficult than it has to be. We can change in small steps. What would it be like if we helped each other succeed? Even those who do not follow us. Imagine the liberal Christian clearing paths for the conservative Christian. Imagine the one on the inside, the clean and proper one, befriending the one on the outside, who may be wrong-headed, ill-advised, and just clearly not one of us. Who may not be all that wrong-headed or ill-advised.

Can we expand the circle and feast together? We would be dining at the *Table of the Blessedly Wounded*, perhaps, with our metaphorical missing limbs and patched-over eyes. We wouldn't be as shiny and self-assured as before. But we would be stumbling-block removers. We'd be healers, exorcists, and feeders of the hungry. Best of all, we would be those who do no harm.

Amen.

¹ Debie Thomas, “If It Causes You to Stumble,” posted September 23, 2018 at <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/>

² Ibid.