

Because You Bear the Name of Christ

Mark 9: 38-41

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 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.

A couple of years ago, just after the 2016 election, I was seated on an airplane next to a talker. Perhaps it was her anxiety of flying, or maybe it was my open pastoral presence, but she just kept talking. I heard about her children and her children’s teachers. I listened to her complain about her mother-in-law. She would talk openly about her faith. There was one point when I’m pretty sure she was trying to convert me to Christianity! But then the conversation shifted when she told me what she did for a living: she was the owner of a gun store. A litany of assumptions began firing in my brain. Eventually, she asked me what I did for a living. I told her I was a pastor. Then she asked me what I thought of guns. I told her I didn’t own one. You could see the assumption firing in her mind about me as she asked, “You’re not one of those liberal preachers, are you?”

Have you ever had an experience where you got lumped into a group because of what you stood for? Have you ever been the one doing the assuming of someone else? We live in a dualistic, either/or, all or nothing society. I heard a pastor speak about what happened to her after attending a Moral Monday rally in Raleigh. Dr. William Barber invited the clergy to stand behind him as he spoke—the local news happened to be there as well. A parishioner who saw her on television asked why *their* pastor was at a Moral Monday rally? She said, she didn’t agree with everything Barber said, but agreed with what he stood for. They said, “Well, it sure looked like you agreed when you were nodding on the 5 O’ Clock news!” Can you hear it? All or nothing. Either/or. A dualistic world. If you happened to listen to the Supreme Court nominee hearing and Dr. Blasey Ford’s testimony we watched how quickly we can become polarized. On one side we hear, “Stop ruining *his* life! Dr. Ford was compelling, but we don’t know it was him!” Then on the other side we hear, “What about *her* life? He is obviously guilty!” It’s all evil: what was done to Dr. Ford is evil, a system which perpetuates abuses and hides them is evil, the way it divides us is all the demonic forces at work. Rather than this being an opportunity to open up a healing conversation about the reality of toxic masculinity in our society, we choose a side and divide. We live in challenging times of either/or, all or nothing thinking. So have you ever been lumped into a group? Have you ever been the one doing the lumping?

We who hang out in churches, we say we are for what Jesus is for. But even saying that could mean different things to different people. Even our gospel writers emphasize Jesus’ ministry in different ways. For Matthew’s gospel Jesus is the fulfiller of the law. For Luke it is about Jesus bring good news to the poor and proclaiming the year of Jubilee. But for Mark, you see, Mark

claims that Jesus' ministry revolves around one thing: exorcizing the demonic forces sewn into the fabric of our everyday systems.

Take a look for yourself. There are nine exorcism stories in the first nine chapters. It's Jesus' first miracle and teaching. It is the first commandment he sends his disciples out two by two to accomplish. It's what he is accused of being himself when the Pharisee's call him a demon because he's been casting out too many demons. When the Syrophoenician woman comes to him what does she ask him to do? You said it, cast out a demon. Remember when Jesus is crossing the sea and he's taking a nap when the storm comes. His disciples yell, "Wake up, don't you care we are perishing?" In Matthew and Luke Jesus says nothing directly to the storm. But in Mark he "rebukes" the storm, "Peace! Be silent!" It's the Greek word *phimos* which is the same word he uses when speaking to the demons. *Phimos*, "Be silent!" For Mark, Jesus' life, death and resurrection centers around releasing us from the presence of evil that promotes fear, hides abuses, spreads lies and sews division which pits God's children against each other.

So when the disciples notice someone who isn't in their little exorcism club, they draw an assumption and try to stop him. He's unchurched. He probably hasn't been baptized. Maybe they think they are the ones who understand what Jesus is about. After all, we all do that. But there is someone else using Jesus' name to liberate others. This unnamed "someone," by the way, is the patron saint for all who serve the oppressed without the official ordained credentials. It's why Jesus says, "Do not stop him. Anyone who is not against us is for us." Jesus is once again widening the circle of who is part of the kingdom work. He says, anyone who is in the business of liberating others from oppressive forces of evil is one of us. In Chicago, you might have heard, they are having crime problems. Now it is ranked the most violent city in the country. The incidents of police corruption and brutality are at an all-time high. So the mayor decided to invite Black Lives Matter into the conversation, asking them for their guidance with reforming their police department. Two groups polarized and pitted against each other by demonic systemic powers, coming together to share the mission. Jesus' kingdom ministry belongs to anyone who is willing to help Jesus do the work. "Whoever is not against us, is for us."

After worship, we will be having an important conversation around Session's decision to affirm the Black Lives Matter movement as part of our work and ministry. Over the past few weeks, you have listened to Donna, Carol, Megan offer you words about why we are moving in this direction. You have read reflections on Dr. King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and you have graciously listened to more sermons around racism than I'm sure you signed up for. While it might seem like we are one-sided, I want you all to know: there is room for where you are with this decision. When we sing "All are Welcome in this place" we don't mean all are welcome "unless"...you disagree, or have concerns, or are afraid. All means all.

A couple of years ago I was having coffee with someone from here. We were having a candid conversation. They said, "I may not agree with everything you say from the pulpit. I may not agree with everything you do...but...I want you to know that I will do whatever I can to help you succeed. I am for you." We do not live in an all or nothing world. We aren't asked to be in the same place, but we are asked to be the church. To help one another succeed in life, in health and in faith. We might not always get it right, but this church is for every woman, man and child to feel the love of God in the deepest core of who they are. All means all.

So we might not have activism in our blood, but because we bear the name of Christ there is room to offer those who are a drink of water to help them keep going. We might not be willing to march in the PRIDE parade in a couple of weeks, but because we bear the name of Christ we can unfold a lawn chair, sit in the crowd, and cheer the rest of us on! If you want to stay home and send us a prayer or blow us a kiss, that is great too! You will not lose your reward!

We are a church. We are for each other—wherever we are, whoever we are. And we work together to make Jesus' ministry a success, widening the circle more and more until all are included and set free.