

## For Us or Against Us?

Mark 9:38-50

Ordinary 26

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<sup>38</sup>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.” <sup>39</sup>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. <sup>40</sup>Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup>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.”

On a day like this, we remember the world is much bigger than we thought it was. Our children sing in Spanish. The psalms are read in two different Indian dialects. Our communion service comes from an island off the coast of Scotland. All of this points to a Christian faith that extends far beyond our reach. That’s appropriate for a day when all the Christians of the world sit down at the same Table.

It’s equally fitting for the church to give us this little text about the unauthorized exorcist. John complains to Jesus that some guy’s been out there trying to cast out demons. He has been doing it in the name of Jesus, but he is not part of their little circle. “We tried to stop him, Lord, because he wasn’t following us.”

And Jesus replies, “Don’t stop him.” Just because he isn’t a Presbyterian doesn’t mean that he isn’t doing God’s work. Or to say it another way without the triple negatives, the work of God’s kingdom is advancing beyond the control of the inner circle. God is busy beyond our boundaries and our borders. The twelve disciples cannot approve or restrict what God is doing.

John sees an exorcist out on the frontier, and discovers he doesn’t have a union card. As John complains to Jesus, “He wasn’t following us.” But that’s not the issue. That anonymous healer was doing his work “in the name of Jesus.” That is what matters.

This summer, when I wasn’t here to control anything, our session hired Josh Frank as our youth worker. I hope you’ve gotten to know him. He’s a great guy. As you may know, Josh also works at Church of the Epiphany as their youth worker. When I got back from my sabbatical, one person was curious about my opinion. She gently asked, “How’s that going to work?” I said, “I think it’s going to work pretty well. After all, Josh is a Methodist.”

My point is this: do the adjectives really matter? In this day and age, in an increasingly secular town like this, it’s a really idea for the churches to work together, to build bridges, to share resources. All the Christians are doing their work in the name of Christ. There is more going on than any small group can control.

Last Thursday night, I poked my head in the session room to say hello to my friend Mary Jane. She’s the pastor of a Presbyterian church in Scranton. Unfortunately their building is built on shaky ground and has been condemned. Mary Jane asked, “Can we borrow one of your rooms for a Bible study?” We said, “Sure,” and they have been meeting on Thursday nights.

I stopped in to say hello. She introduced me. Somebody in the group playfully said, “We don’t have to join your church, do we?” I laughed. About all I could say was, “All of us are already on the same team.”

We say that because it’s not our team. It’s not yours or mine. It is Christ’s team. The world belongs to him. The ministry belongs to him. Whenever or wherever the world is taken in for repairs, it could very well be the work of Jesus.

The Alcoholics Anonymous were here at 7:00 this morning, looking in on one another, speaking words of healing and truth. They gather every day to rescue and to be rescued. Christ is “with them.” Today’s special offering supports the work of the Women’s Resource Center. They stand with people who have been battered, speak up for justice, and care for people who are ignored. That is God’s work.

Tonight Rev. Wonjae will serve communion to the youth groups of our presbytery. About the same time, I’ll offer a prayer at a candlelight vigil for the National Alliance on Mental Illness. We do these things for the same reason that so many of you get involved in the community: because God is already out there mending broken lives, chasing away evil, and speaking truth to power.

This is the Gospel of Mark views ministry. God sends Jesus to exorcise the world, to drive away every form of meanness and destruction, and to free people to live healthy and joyful lives. Whoever joins in such work belongs to God, because it is God’s intent to save the world. If you’re not against this, that means you are available to join it. And because it is God who working, it is always going to be bigger than our ability to understand or control.

One of my favorite theologians was a Presbyterian minister named Lesslie Newbigin. As most of you know, Presbyterians don’t have bishops. But Newbigin was the only Presbyterian who was appointed a bishop. He was ordained by the Church of Scotland in 1936 and sent as a missionary to India. He worked to bring together all the Christians of India. Eleven years later, when the Church of South India was formed as a great ecumenical denomination, they decided they would be led by a bishop – and they asked Lesslie Newbigin. He said, “The Presbyterians might not understand this back in Scotland, but I would be honored to serve as bishop.”

Somebody tell the apostle John: when God gets busy beyond the old comfortable neighborhood, it can be a little awkward. But when it becomes clear that it’s God who is busy, anybody who belongs to God can bless the bigger ministry. Lesslie Newbigin put it this way:

It is impossible to define exactly the boundaries of the church, and the attempt to do so always ends in an [unchristian] legalism. But it is always possible and necessary to define the centre. The church is its proper self, and is a sign of the kingdom, only insofar as it continually points men and women beyond itself to Jesus and invites them to conversion and commitment to him.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, Sign of the Kingdom (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980) 68.

Let today be a lesson for every disciple. God sends Jesus into this world to save it. His saving work reaches further than we can imagine. His work always involves more people than we can number. It is God's work; therefore we cannot control it or hover over it.

All we can do is join it, and say, "Thank God that my family is larger than I realized."