

"Owning Jesus." Numbers 11:16-18, 24-30; Ps. 124; Mark 9:38-50
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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The disciples were leaders-in-training. Jesus was constantly teaching them through parables, acts of healing and miracles, and through prayer. He was teaching them valuable lessons for leading his people when he was gone.

But just because he was teaching them doesn't mean they were good students. One of the lessons the disciples might have picked up on could have come from Jesus' dealings with the Scribes and the Pharisees. They were the leaders of the Jewish establishment. They were often scandalized by Jesus' teachings and actions and the people with whom he associated.

The Scribes and Pharisees were the gatekeepers and the protectors of Judaism. Jesus was a direct challenge to their authority and power.

Since Jesus didn't like the way the Scribes and Pharisees tried to build walls around the Jewish faith, it's interesting to me that Jesus' disciples appear to be doing the same thing in this story.

John is the one who speaks up. Note what he says: "Teacher we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us."

Isn't that peculiar? John doesn't say: "We stopped him because he wasn't following you" - meaning "Jesus". No. John seems concerned because this anonymous exorcist wasn't following the disciples.

Could it be that the disciples are starting to adopt gate-keeping tendencies just like the Scribes and Pharisees?

Is John upset because this person is “practicing exorcism without a license”? Using power that rightfully belonged to them?

Is it simply a question of jealousy?

You may recall the story in Mark's gospel of a time when the disciples talked about which one of them was the greatest. And, just before that discussion there is the story of a time when the disciples were unable to cast out a demon.

Now they are confronted with someone who isn't following Jesus the same way they are, and yet is using Jesus' name in a powerful way. He's been successful in casting out demons! People are being healed (something which is forgotten altogether in this exchange). Are the disciples jealous??

If they are, we shouldn't be too surprised. There are many Christians the world over who express their faith in ways that make us uncomfortable, or curious, disdainful, and even jealous.

Sometimes, when faced with the amazing diversity of denominations, worship styles, and creeds, we are tempted to say: “Why can't they just be more like us?” It certainly would be a lot easier. There'd be a lot less fighting and strife, wouldn't there?

Wouldn't it be easier if everyone followed God the same way? Wouldn't it be nice if everyone had the same understanding of how God works, what God requires, how they should worship, praise, pray, work and witness?

Wouldn't it be great if everyone had the same gifts, saw things in the same light, shared similar opinions on everything?

Jesus' answer is an emphatic "No"! How boring! How bland. It would be like having no salt!

The apostle Paul also reminds us that diversity is part of God's plan. The important thing is we share the same Spirit of God, even though that one Spirit pours out different gifts upon God's people so that God's will may be done in earth as it is in heaven.

But, instead of celebrating the diversity born of the one Spirit of God, we look upon it as a challenge and a source of contention.

It's as though we are inclined to say: "You follow God in your way, and I'll follow God in His!"

The disciples want to sue the anonymous exorcist for "copyright infringement". They "own" Jesus. They want to protect the "Jesus" brand name from unlawful use.

But, as soon as they make their concern known to Jesus, he cuts them off. In the church built upon him there is no room for intolerance or excluding anyone. Jesus keeps the boundaries fluid and alive.

Whenever we draw a circle around ourselves and think we have Jesus in the middle, right where we want him, he jumps over the line to stand with the outsider, the marginalized, the one who is different from us.

If we are going to do any drawing, let's draw the line that connects us to Jesus and try to make that line as straight and true as possible.

When we do that, there is room for an infinite number of spokes connecting others and indeed all creation to Christ, the one who holds all things together in the power of his love.

We must keep our Christ-connection, not as something we own but rather as something which is a source of life and hope and possibility and power!

If we lose our Christ-connection or if we forget who is in the center holding all things together, there's bound to be trouble.

In chapter 19 of the Book of Acts there is a story from Paul's missionary activities. He had been teaching, doing healings and exorcisms. A group of itinerant Jewish exorcists heard what Paul was doing and they decided to give his angle a try.

In particular there were 7 sons of a Jewish priest named Sceva who said to a man possessed by an evil spirit: "I command you by the Jesus preached by Paul!" But the evil spirit talked back: "I know Jesus, and I've heard of Paul, but who are you?" And the possessed man went into a frenzy and beat up the 7 sons and tore off their clothes. Naked and bloody, they got away from there as best they could.

There is power in the name of Jesus. The focus is never on the one using the name. It is always on the name itself.

Jesus said: "No one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me."

One cannot perform deeds of power for long without acknowledging the power of the name that is above all names.

For sure there is a danger in operating without a license as the sons of Sceva found out. But when the "license" is sincere faith in Jesus, there need not be any fear.

Rather than worrying about why others aren't more like us, rather than thinking we "own" the Jesus franchise, we would do well to focus on trusting that God is in control.

Trust that those who confess Jesus as Lord and yet express their spirituality in ways different from ours, are nothing for us to worry about or to envy or even necessarily to imitate.

If we simply worry about imitating Jesus - his love and care, his concern for the outcast, the forgotten, the sick, the neighbor on the other side of the dividing wall we so easily erect --- we will have more than enough to do!.

So let us be the distinctive (salty) Christians Jesus calls us to be, and let us continue to be at peace with who we are and with one another.

Amen.