

The next time I'm in the Harrisburg area I'm meeting a local friend at their new LL Bean store, which is across the street from the REI—another outdoor clothing and recreational equipment store. I used to think it was completely illogical when AutoZone moved in beside Advanced Auto, or Target built next to WalMart, or Rutters set up across from Sheetz, instead of one taking one end of town and one the other; yet moving into the same neighborhood obviously works for them because they keep doing it. Although their mission is to separate us consumers from our money, the advantage isn't just on their side. If one store is out of what I need, there's a chance it's in stock at the other; instead of settling for one brand, I have options; and the price wars that start every time they build a new gas station have saved me a considerable amount of money. We could certainly lament the impact of large companies overwhelming smaller, family-owned businesses, and in spite of going to both Lowe's and Home Depot yesterday for a hot water heater, I still had to shower at the gym this morning, but often putting two operations of similar size and purpose near each other ends up benefiting both the buyers and the sellers. The church has been slow to recognize that synergy, in spite of scripture teaching this lesson a couple of times.

Today's gospel continues the scene we began reading last week where Jesus discourages the disciples from arguing about who is the greatest and instead teaches them to value even a little child who has no social status or standing. Their immediate reaction is to miss Jesus' point again, as John reports their attempt to exclude yet one more person from their community. *Teacher, John says, We saw someone doing exactly what you told us to do, and doing it in your name, so we tried to stop him, because he wasn't part of our group...* I don't get the sense that John was making a confession here but proudly fishing for praise for trying to stop this other exorcist. Jesus sees it differently: *Don't try to stop him; whoever is not against us is for us. It's really hard for someone to criticize our mission if they are doing the exact same thing themselves.*

Of course, we know that Jesus is right because Jesus is Jesus. But even if it wasn't Jesus giving this advice, it is pretty compelling and practical logic. We can't credibly complain about other people doing what we do. If someone else is doing the same good work we claim is our mission, who are we to tell them to stop? It's worth asking what John meant when he accused that other exorcist of *not following us*, because it sounds like that he was not only claiming Jesus' name but doing Jesus work—the same work Jesus had been doing. The disciples seem more interested in the power and authority they presume to have as members of Jesus' inner circle than in the welfare of the people—in the demon-possessed being freed from their demons. Jesus called the disciples

for the work of sharing the good news and doing acts of healing; they didn't exist for themselves but for a purpose—for following Jesus' example of selfless service to others, which is what that other exorcist was doing. While the disciples were busy arguing about which one of them was the greatest, this other guy was out there doing the work.

The disciples should have known better, since they would have been familiar with the story from Numbers of Eldad and Medad prophesying in the camp instead of at the tent of meeting. Joshua wants Moses to stop them, but Moses sees the bigger picture: *Don't make it about me; I wish all the Lord's people were out there doing the Lord's work.* Lest we criticize the disciples too harshly for forgetting that story, remember we have both that story from Numbers *and* this story from Mark to inform our perspective, and as the church we *still* are susceptible to doubting how God could be at work through other people in the world. Part of what keeps us divided into denominations and separated from different faiths is our reluctance to believe that other people could possibly be practicing proper discipleship or living as God intends if they're not part of our faith community.

I'm not endorsing relativism, and we always have a responsibility to make sure that what we do in Jesus' name is, in fact, reflective of what Jesus himself said and did. Not using the Lord's name in vain is less about what we say when we stub a toe than it is about doing un-Christlike things under the guise of religion. Just because someone says something is what Jesus would do doesn't necessarily make it so: think about the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, Manifest Destiny. But that wasn't what was happening in Mark's gospel. That other exorcist wasn't doing bad things in Jesus' name; he was doing exactly what Jesus had told his disciples to do...just not as a member of their same group.

Jesus employs hyperbole to teach the disciples not to put up barriers where Jesus himself has not: it would be better to drown under a millstone or lose a hand or a foot or an eye than to be a roadblock in front of someone who is trying to be a disciple. Joshua and Jesus' disciples were not the only ones who failed in this way; the whole of Christian history right up to and including our contemporary society is full of people who will say, or more often shout, *They can't be faithful because they don't conform to our interpretation of the faith...* even if that criticism is levied against someone who is doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. The work to which we are called as disciples is not the work of keeping people out. Imagine the chasms we could bridge in our deeply divided world if we believed Jesus when he said, *Whoever is not against us is for us.* May we not see others as enemies to fight but as neighbors to welcome.