

Sunday, September 30, 2018
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 21 (Year B)
Numbers 11.4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9.38-50
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

I'm going to let you in on a little of the private life of your Rector. A key part of my morning routine is reading the Long Beach Press-Telegram on my tablet while I'm eating breakfast. I read all the headlines of the daily news, occasionally reading parts or all of articles that might interest me. And I finish up with the most important part of the paper—the comics. That is the part of the paper that I enjoy most. Some days, the only part I really enjoy. And the part that is most critical to my morning routine, other than my morning prayers. One of my favorite comics is "Baby Blues." For those not familiar with this little gem, it is the story of the MacPherson family—parents Wanda and Darryl, and their three kids, Zoe, Hammie, and Wren. Zoe is the oldest girl, aged nine. Followed by the only boy, Hammie, aged six. And then there's the baby girl, Wren, about a year and a half old. One of the ongoing themes of the comic is the interaction between Zoe and Hammie. Hammie is a typical boy for his age, always trying to find the perfect way to annoy his big sister. And Zoe is at that age where she tattles on virtually everything that Hammie does. Typical siblings. Not unlike the way my sister Lisa and I were when we were younger (and sometimes still are). Only I'm older than Lisa. But when we were younger, I would try to annoy her and she would tattle on me. Anyway, the parents, usually Wanda, has to deal with Hammie's antics and Zoe's tattling. Ah, family.

Well, today's reading from Mark's Gospel is just a variation on that most endearing of family dynamics—tattling. The disciples witness someone casting out demons and run to Jesus, tattling. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us" (Mk 9.38). You can almost see Jesus rolling his eyes. You can certainly hear the exasperation in Jesus' voice as he essentially tells the disciples to knock it off. "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me" (Mk 9.39). Or as my mother would have said, "If you don't start playing nice, I'm gonna start knocking heads." (Not that Mom ever would, but we didn't know that at the time.)

But then Jesus goes on with some unsettling, even disturbing, imagery: "If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off . . . And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off . . . And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out . . . it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with [one hand or one foot or] one eye than to have [two hands or two feet or] two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched" (Mk 9.42-48).

As one commentator notes, "Mark was not attempting to develop a dogma of eternal damnation here. But Jesus' graphic words leave no doubt as to the seriousness of being an obstacle to another person's relationship with God" (*Synthesis*, Proper 21, 9/30/18). Or as related to the exorcist that is the subject of the disciples' tattling, what is more important is

how we view and engage in the work of the Gospel. That “these graphic directives to cut off a hand, a foot, or to tear out an eye, are not meant to be taken literally. Such exaggerated metaphors illustrate the necessity of ridding ourselves of the things in our lives that hold us back from wholehearted devotion to God” (*Synthesis*, Proper 21, 9/30/18). And as in the case of the disciples who are critical of the exorcist and upset that he is doing Jesus’ work while not being one of his followers, the necessity of ridding ourselves of the things in our lives that hold us back from being able to see what needs to be done and then doing it.

Why would Mark’s Gospel record such graphic and exaggerated imagery? Mark may have been conveying a scene from Jesus’ ministry in order to deal with some sort of internal conflict in the community that he was writing to. Possibly a conflict over differing theological perspectives. Possibly conflict over differing views of what one has to do or believe to be considered a Christian. Possibly conflict between those who had suffered persecution in Jesus’ name and those who abandoned the faith but now wanted to come back to the community. Regardless, Mark invites the members of his conflicted community “into Jesus’s story in order to reframe how they think about their lives, their commitments, their identity, and their vision of what constitutes authentic Christian community” (David Lose, “In the Meantime” email, 9/24/18).

While we don’t tend to have the same types of conflicts today, at least not within individual congregations, we are still a group of disparate individuals with our own unique perspectives on just about everything in the church community. And while we may have done a decent job of learning how to accommodate and live with our differences, we sometimes need to be reminded of who we are. We need to be invited to assess ourselves and reframe how we think about our lives, our identities as Christians, and what it means to live into that identity.

Today’s Gospel, supported by our Old Testament reading which is thematically related to the Gospel, provides some key points on what this means. On what we are invited to remember and to critically assess in our own lives as members of the Body of Christ.

First is the purpose of our ministry. We see this in the man casting out demons in the Gospel account. He did not come to Jesus demanding to be an apostle so that he would have the necessary “authority” to use his gifts to engage in ministry. Rather, he saw a need—that there were those possessed by demons who needed exorcism. He knew he had the gifts to perform this work, so he simply did it. He was not trying to upstage Jesus and his disciples. He was merely filling a need. Perhaps taking care of an overflow of need.

We see a similar thing in the Old Testament reading from Numbers. Moses was overloaded with the demands of leading the Israelites and with proclaiming the prophecies that conveyed God’s desires to the people. So he appointed 70 elders to help out—to engage in the work of administration and prophecy. Meanwhile, there were a couple of other men, Eldad and Medad, who, while not of the chosen 70, also received the necessary gift of prophecy imparted by God’s spirit. They didn’t see a need to go to Moses and beg to be made elders. Instead, they simply used the gifts given to them. And they did a fine job. But there were those who got bent out of shape because Eldad and Medad had not been “officially sanctioned” for that work. At least not by human agency. Like the exorcist in Mark, these two men saw a need, had a gift for the work that needed to be done, and used their God-given gifts to fill that need.

In both cases, there was a need for ministry. To those who undertook those ministries, it was not about them. It was about using what they had been given by God to fill the need. It was about doing God's work. The ministry that we do is really not our ministry, even though we sometimes use that term. It is really God's ministry. And God shares the work with any who are willing to do it.

The second point is found in the actions of the disciples and the tattlers in the Old Testament reading. In the case of our friends Eldad and Medad, Moses commends them for what they are doing. He even lifts them up as examples. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit in them" (Num 11.29). Or as one commentator put it, "How wonderful it would be for all God's faithful followers to receive such inspiration and to share in the responsibilities of leadership in the community" (*Synthesis*, Proper 21, 9/30/18). Moses is really saying that those tattling on Eldad and Medad have a narrow understanding of the truth and could learn something from them.

In the case of the disciples tattling on the exorcist in Mark's Gospel, Jesus frames it in a different way by referring to the narrow understanding of God's truth as a stumbling block. Whereupon he uses the graphic and exaggerated imagery of it being better to cut off a hand or foot or tear out an eye than to be such a stumbling block to one who seeks to engage in the work God puts before them. Like Moses, he is conveying that those looking on and criticizing have a narrow understanding of God's work and who can do it. And how they can do it.

This narrow understanding of ministry is colored by misperceptions as to who is "authorized" to do it, as well as how the ministry is to be done. As to the "who"—how often are people excluded from a particular ministry because they are not part of the "old guard" or the "in group"? How often are people excluded from a particular ministry because there is the perception that you have to be explicitly invited to participate? That you have to "pay your dues"? And as to the "how"—how often do we hear "we've never done it that way" or "we've always done it that way"? All of these limitations on who does ministry and how it gets done. All of these attempts to limit how God accomplishes his ministry.

In their respective responses, both Moses and Jesus are essentially saying that we need to value the good being done in ways we may not do them by people we don't have control over. Because ministry is not a competition, but a collaboration. A collaboration between God and his people. In so doing, God pours out his spirit even on those "outside the tent." Whatever it takes for God to get the ministry done.

Which leads to the third and most important point. While not explicitly stated in either Numbers or Mark, but yet implied in both Moses' and Jesus' responses to the tattlers is that those who profess to be part of the community of faith are challenged to accept a broader understanding of what it means to serve in God's name. That sometimes we need to think outside the box when it comes to ministry. We need to accept "outsiders" who have the gifts and talents to do what needs to be done. And that we need be open to new and different ways of doing ministry.

Jesus is most explicit in directing the disciples—and us—to reflect on our own life and ministry rather than worrying about the ministries of others. Jesus calls on the disciples—and us—to examine our own behaviors which might cause those who want to engage in ministry to turn away out of frustration. Jesus essentially tells them—and us—to worry about ourselves, not what others are doing.

Or as Rachael Keefe, pastor of Living Table United Church of Christ in Minneapolis so eloquently and succinctly summarizes: “Let go of what is not yours to carry, because your hands are meant for holy work” (Rachael Keefe, *Christian Century*, “Living Word” for September 30, 2018).