

Pentecost 19B (9/30/2018)
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Psalm 19:7-14
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

Belonging can be a double-edged sword. To what extent does our inclusion in community imply the exclusion of others? Is it possible to both have a strong affinity for one's own group and be attentive to those who are outside of it? The love of God simultaneously gathers us in and turns us outward. Communities in Christ are not insular, but inevitably drawn into relationship with those beyond our boundaries.

I've never been entirely comfortable with the metaphor of "family" for a congregation. It's a nice sentiment; if my church is my family, then my fellow congregants are included in an extended network of those to whom I belong. The family metaphor implies that a congregation is a community held together by mutual care and concern, a group of people ready and willing to bear each other's burdens. The problem arises when we go to draw the boundary between who is and who is not part of the family. After all, families are more or less exclusive – you're a member by blood or by name or by marriage or by some other measure, but ultimately we draw the line and not everyone has a seat at the dinner table. **If a congregation is a family, then who is in and who is out?**

The answer to that question is likely to expose the barriers we erect, overt or subtle, that cause congregations to become insular. If the boundaries of our church family privilege one race or ethnicity over another,

one family structure over another, or one set of cultural assumptions over another, for instance, then we're bound to cut ourselves off from all those who don't fit the mold.

"John said to Jesus, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'" The first verse of our Gospel from Mark seems to suggest that John and the other disciples expect Jesus to approve of their effort to maintain the integrity of their in-group. *Teacher, some random Joe was presuming to perform the good work to which you've called your followers, but we put the kibosh on that because he's not one of us. Aren't you glad?*

Not surprisingly, the disciples are way off base. Their preoccupation with drawing a line between insider and outsider misses the point of casting out demons in the first place. "Do not stop him," Jesus responds, "for... whoever is not against us is for us." In other words, **the man's social affiliation is not what matters here; what matters is the well-being of those he serves. *Is he freeing afflicted people from their afflictions? Jesus might have asked. Is his ministry consistent with God's intent to bring about fullness of life? Yes? Whoever is not against us is for us.***

The story in today's Gospel reveals that belonging in the community of Jesus' followers is fluid and imprecise. Jesus has called his disciples together into a life of meaning and hope. They've given up relationships, careers, and

homes to join his motley crew, but it's a privilege to be a part of it. And, the disciples have internalized this privilege such that they're wary of including others in the way of life to which Jesus has invited them: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following *us*."

The temptation to monitor the boundaries of belonging is as strong today as it was for the first disciples. Don't we also tend to establish criteria, conscious or unconscious, for inclusion in our preferred groups? Of course, there are good reasons for cultivating a strong community. As one interpreter explains:

The community is a place of identity, where people have a sense of belonging because they are known and recognized. The community provides protection and support. The community shapes values and provides cultural norms.

But there are risks in a strong community. The expectations and demands of a social order may restrict the freedom and creativity of a person. The past ways may not be suitable for the challenges of the future. A strong community may be so focused on itself that it loses the capacity to relate to those outside.¹

In other words, **belonging can be a double-edged sword. To what extent does our inclusion in community imply the exclusion of others? Is it possible to both have a strong affinity for one's own group and be attentive those who are outside of it?**

¹ Harry B. Adams, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, 116.

One of the practical ways I've learned to test the flexibility of social boundaries is to take a moment at the beginning of every event in which I take part to ask myself, **"Who is not here, and why?"** **We often take our gatherings for granted, but it can be a fruitful challenge to notice who is absent for the sake of better understanding the social dynamics at work.**

For example:

"Why are there no women at this conference of pastors?"

"Why are there no people of color at this board meeting?"

"Why are there no young people serving on this committee?"

"Who is not here, and why?"

Eventually, we might even dare to ask such questions out loud in order to confront the ways we may be setting up obstacles to relationship and cooperation. After all, whoever is not against us is for us.

Of course, speaking up like that takes courage, and courage is a product of faith. Dear church, **the love of God simultaneously gathers us in and turns us outward. Even as Jesus has claimed us as his kindred, conferring on us an irrevocable dignity, he also orients us toward others who are not already among us. For this reason, communities in Christ are not insular, but inevitably drawn into relationship with those beyond our boundaries. And God willing, this pattern will set the standard for all the communities to which we belong.**