

Message for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (9/26/2021)
Mark 9:38-50

I've never been entirely comfortable with the family metaphor for a congregation. It's a nice sentiment; if my church is my family, then I'm included in an extended network of belonging. In other words, 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 the family draws a line and not everyone has a seat at the dinner table.

So, if a congregation is a family, then who's in and who's out?

The answer to that question is likely to reveal the barriers we erect, consciously or unconsciously, that cause congregations to become insular. If our church family privileges one race or ethnicity over another, one culture over another, one form of religious expression over another, then we're bound to cut ourselves off from 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 today suggests that John and the other disciples expect Jesus to approve of their efforts to maintain the integrity of their in-group.

Teacher, some dude was presuming to do the kind of 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, they're way off base. **The disciples' 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 replies, "for... whoever is not against us is for us." In other words, the man's affiliation is not what matters here; what matters is the well-being of those he serves. *Is he liberating afflicted people from their afflictions? Is his ministry consistent with God's intent to bring life to the world? Yes? Then don't worry about it. 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, nevertheless there is a certain privilege in being part of it. And, the disciples have internalized this privilege such that they're wary of including others in Jesus' way of life: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following *us.*"

The tendency to monitor the boundaries of belonging is as strong today as it was then. We, too, establish criteria, spoken and unspoken, for inclusion in our preferred groups.

Of course, there are good reasons for cultivating a strong community. As one interpreter puts it:

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 in community can be a double-edged sword. **To what extent does our inclusion imply the exclusion of others? How can we retain a connection both to our own group and to those who are not part of it?**

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 gathering in which I take part to ask myself, **"Who is not here, and why?"** We often take our groups for granted, but it's a worthwhile discipline to take note of who is absent in an effort to understand the social dynamics at work. For instance:

"There are no LGBTQ2SIA folks here. Why are there no LGBTQ2SIA leaders at this conference?"

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

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

“There are no young people here. Why are there no young people on this committee?”

Do we take the time to ask, “Who is not here, and why?” What’s more, do we dare to ask these questions out loud in order to interrupt our patterns? If no one says anything, then “the way we’ve always done things” will continue to hinder diversity in our partnerships. And, whoever is not against us is for us.

Of course, speaking up like that takes courage, but courage goes hand in hand with faith. Friends, **the love of God simultaneously gathers us in and turns us outward.** Even as Jesus claims us as his family, conferring on us a fundamental dignity, he also orients us toward those who are not among us. For this reason, communities in Christ are not insular, but inevitably drawn into relationship across boundaries. And God willing, that dynamic will set the standard for all the communities to which we belong.