

lec 26 B-September 29, 2024

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19:7-14; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

St Paul Newark—Barbara Melosh

“Whoever is not against us is for us.” As you just heard, this is Jesus’ reply to John, who is upset about a rival exorcist—someone casting out demons, who is not one of Jesus’ disciples. Maybe this answer surprised you, because we usually hear this expression reversed:—“Whoever is not for us is against us.” It’s a big difference, of course. “Whoever is not for us is against us” draws a hard line between “us” and “them”, supporter or opponent, insider or outsider. Jesus’ reply, in contrast, makes an inclusive claim. You’re one of us, whether you know it or not, as long as you’re not an active opponent.

At this point in Mark, the disciples are dealing with confusion and with conflict. Last week, we heard about their struggles for position and honor within their group—the argument on the road about who was the greatest. These are men under pressure. They’ve heard Jesus predicting his suffering and death twice now; they are living out what it means to be part of a group that is running into more and more opposition from others—including both political heavyweights and their own elders and religious leaders. And when groups are under pressure, they often draw their boundaries more tightly, and challenge others to declare, “which side are you on?” Israel or Palestine? Red or blue? Citizen or alien?

Boundaries are often a source of conflict and division, even violence, but they are also life-giving. They help us know who we are and where we belong. Every community needs boundaries—and every community also needs to be aware of how it is drawing the line between insider and outsider, and how that affects both insiders and outsiders.¹

That’s what the disciples and Jesus are doing in this story.

Life together is all about negotiating boundaries. Some boundaries defend property or define its legitimate use—“no trespassing”. “No parking at any time.” “Official vehicles only.” “No pets allowed.” Other boundaries are set to keep people safe. “Construction area—do not enter.” We make laws to

¹ “Pastoral Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, Yr B vol. 4, 118.

set limits on sex, to prevent exploitation and abuse of children or anyone vulnerable to someone with more power.

Then there are national borders, which are themselves the result of histories of settlement, conquest, and colonization. Some can be crossed easily, like the boundaries of European Union countries—no passports, no visas. Most borders are regulated—you have to show a passport and declare your plans to get into most countries, and to get back into your own. Just a few years ago, border crossings were complicated by the threat and policy responses to the pandemic. For months, your U.S. passport wouldn't get you into Canada or anywhere in the European Union, and people from a long list of countries couldn't come here. To enter some places, you had to show proof of vaccination. And then of course there's the ongoing conflict about who can cross our own southern border.

Boundaries divide us, but they also bind us together. Boundaries are declarations of identity. To join the VFW, you have to have served in the military in a conflict in a foreign country. To join the AARP, you have to be fifty years old or more. To be a Christian, you're baptized, and we affirm that identity every week here when we say the creed or share communion.

We need boundaries. But which ones? And who can cross?

In today's story, John comes to Jesus with a boundary dispute. Someone else has been casting out demons in Jesus' name—a rogue exorcist, who isn't following them. We don't know why. It seems he could just be using Jesus' name—taking advantage of the news that's spreading everywhere, about the amazing deeds of the miracle worker of Galilee. The disciples don't think this man should be using the name of Jesus when he isn't one of them. Maybe too they feel threatened by his success. Mark tells us that right before this, the disciples have tried and failed to cast out a demon. Now this guy, who's not even one of the chosen twelve, is getting it done. Anyway, for whatever reason, they try to get him to stop what he's doing, and John comes to Jesus to report the problem.

Jesus tells him not to worry about it. It's not a competition. He explains there's even a benefit to them when this outsider uses his name—he won't be able to speak evil of Jesus soon after. Why not? It seems that Jesus is

just making a shrewd calculation—if this man is using Jesus’ name to promote himself, he won’t be able to turn around and trash-talk Jesus right away without hurting his own brand.

Then Jesus turns around John’s concern about this outsider by setting a much wider boundary—“whoever is not against us is for us.” And anyone who helps in even the smallest way—offering a cup of water to refresh them—will be included in some future reward.

Imagine what it would be like, to live in the confidence of Jesus’ “whoever is not against us is for us.” If we drew the line that way, we would be set free from worrying about what other people think.

Set free from resentment of those who don’t actively join us.

Set free from judging others and trying to control.

Free from counting heads, calculating who is on one side or the other.

Free from keeping score.

Free to work with people who you disagree with—and thanks be to God, we already are doing this as a church. The LCA and the Missouri synod split bitterly years ago. We do not commune at each other’s tables. But we cross that boundary to share a strong and vibrant global mission, serving together in the name of Christ in the world.

Free to stop worrying if we have done enough. It all counts—the small gesture. The word of comfort. The kindness to a stranger. The cup of water that you offer.

Free to be generous neighbors, ready to welcome unexpected allies and friends.

Free to let go of the idea that we own Jesus, so we can open our hearts to the people he loves, and to join hands to share God’s work in the world.

Thanks be to God.