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Proper 21B: Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

St. Anne's Episcopal Church – Annapolis, MD

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*Who Does That Guy Think He Follows?*

In first century Palestine, when Jesus walked the land, “demon possession” was the best way to describe the forces at work that destroyed human lives.<sup>1</sup> Demons ran rampant in those days. They broke through human defenses, took over lives, minds, hearts, ravaged everything human about a person, leaving twisted, broken, mad, and mean beings who did not resemble their former selves, still less the beautiful, beloved, valued people God had intended them to be. People felt powerless to confront, much less cast out, these demons. It's no wonder that in the first century, exorcists were in high demand. And Jesus, according to the gospel of Mark, was an exorcist extraordinaire. He had power to confront and cast out demonic forces, restore people to full human life, to set them free from the demonic powers that held them captive so they could once again be full human participants in community, the people God intended them to be. Exorcism was one of the chief weapons in Jesus' arsenal of power in the kingdom of God.

But Jesus did not keep this power to himself. He gave it to his disciples, to his followers. He told them they have his authority to heal, to preach in his name; to continue his redeeming and transforming work; to cast out demons that turn humans into slaves to dark powers, that rob them of human dignity, that leave them shells of their former selves, that keep them from being the full, beautiful, beloved, and valued people God means them to be.

Earlier in Mark's gospel we see that sometimes the first disciples struggled with this power. Sometimes they tried to use this power that was given in his name, and failed.

In today's gospel we hear that along came someone who did not attend any of Jesus' lectures, who did not sit through all those confusing parables, who isn't in the group of the Twelve, who hasn't been to seminary,

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was inspired in part by a sermon by The Rev. Dr. Brian K. Blount, which you can listen to at <http://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/the-exorcist>.

who has not been instituted and installed, who has not ponied up at stewardship time, who doesn't volunteer for any committees, who has been casting out demons in the name of Jesus, and apparently, it's working. So, say the disciples, we held a meeting and we reviewed the minutes of our last meeting and we reviewed the constitutions and canons and we made sure we had a quorum, and we passed a resolution that spells out why this unlicensed exorcist is not qualified, and then we told him to stop.

Don't get me wrong. As I poke fun at the disciples, I'm a little uncomfortable myself. I have diplomas on my wall, in Latin, in case anyone wants to see just how qualified I am. I now have a letter from the bishop of this diocese giving me the authority of the church to exercise the ministry to which I have been called. I have been charged by the vestry of this parish church to be a priest who helps this church to grow in numbers of membership as well as in depth of discipleship, including among families with young children, and don't tell me that's not a group who wonders if demon-possession still happens today.

So I feel for those disciples as they see someone who is not following us actually doing the work of Jesus in Jesus' name.

Aren't there a number of voices throughout the whole church today, on all sides of all issues, still working out this little episode amongst the first disciples? "I don't care if that church is growing, their priest is too conservative really to be faithful." "You know, those liberal Episcopalians will be the downfall of the church." Pick a side, any side, and sadly, we can sometimes see more finger-pointing than Christian love and fellowship. "You know, in that church, they just tell you what to believe – they don't ever use their brains." "You know, in that church, they're just so formal and cold – they don't really engage the heart."

Meanwhile, off goes Jesus, looking for people who will follow him, rather than, like the first disciples, getting all anxious when people aren't following us.

You know, there are a lot of people who aren't in here, who wonder what we're doing in here. Actually, I'm more concerned that there are a lot of people who don't wonder – they are pretty sure that what Christianity is about has nothing to do with the love of God we know in Jesus Christ. A lot of people who have never experienced the true joy of Christian community, of following Jesus, are pretty sure that Christianity is about being narrow-

mindful and judgmental. This belief is expressed in bumper stickers that say, "Dear Lord, protect me from your followers," t-shirts that proclaim, "Thou Shalt Not Inflict your Religion on me," and this bumper sticker that I actually like, "It takes more than a chrome fish, pal." Well, it does. I'll give them that one. We bump into this picture of Christianity if ever we have hesitated to tell someone about our faith for fear of being perceived as judgmental, holier-than-thou, or preachy.

"Teacher" says John, "We saw someone casting out demons in your name, but they weren't following us, so we told them to stop." "Teacher, someone was doing good, setting free, healing, stopping the pain, announcing good news, educating, bringing hope, in your name, but they aren't following us, so we told them to stop."

Jesus proclaimed a God who would not be limited by any human boundaries. Jesus proclaimed hope that could not be contained or owned or trademarked, even by those with the best of credentials. Jim Wallis said, "You know, Jesus survives the church, again and again. You go out in the street and you ask anybody, Christian, non-Christian, whatever, what did Jesus stand for? And people will tell you he cared about the poor, the outcast, the prostitutes, the vulnerable people. . . he was for peace. He was loving. He was compassionate. Everybody felt welcome. . . Somehow Jesus survives."

We are here to follow Jesus. We're in an Episcopal Church, at least I am, because for me this is the best way to live in a Christian community that helps me in my desire to follow Jesus. I want us to draw more members, not so people will follow us, but so people will follow Jesus.

Here's the thing: we've still got work to do. Powers that corrupt and destroy human beings, that rob people of their dignity, leave them empty shells of their former selves, keep them from being the beautiful and beloved children of God they were meant to be are still at work in the world. Jesus gave power to his followers to cast out demons – anything that robs us of our humanity – the fullness of life that is ours as people made in the image of God. Jesus gave his followers power to cast out demons, and that power didn't stop just because the demons of our day may be different from the demons of his.

What are you doing with your share of that power? What demons do you see at work as you go through your week – pick one: is it illiteracy? Poverty? Substance abuse? Hunger? Racism? Maybe it is the demon that delights in dividing Jesus' followers from one another, rather than having us celebrate the gift and privilege of following him. Jesus wanted to raise up exorcists so that whenever evil forces rise up there are people wielding Jesus' power to knock those demons back into the pit they crawled out of.

What if this were a place where we so focused on following Jesus, that we had no time for divisions – not here within our own congregation, or for any divisions that others wish to draw us into?

Do you know anyone who thinks Christians are narrow-minded, judgmental, bear little resemblance to Jesus? What if this week, you do one thing that makes people re-think their definition of "Christian"? What if this week, you have one conversation with someone who would be surprised to hear that someone as cool as you are is a person of faith? What if you share one thing about your faith with someone who thinks that you are just a nice person, rather than someone trying to follow Jesus?

Jesus wants to marshal whatever forces of goodness towards his world he can. Jesus will find whatever means he can to show love and grace towards his brothers and sisters – those who call on his name, and those who do not yet, and those who never may. Jesus has work for us to do. Let us follow him.

Amen.