

FIRST LESSON: Numbers 11:24-29
SECOND LESSON: Mark 9:38-50
September 29, 2024

“God’s Gonna Do What God’s Gonna Do”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

We saw someone doing “our” thing, so we told them that that is OUR THING, and they have to stop.

Some people from a church we don’t approve of because they are either too liberal or too conservative are out doing good things in the name of Christ, and that’s just plain wrong because they don’t have the right to do that, only we do.

Our Jewish or Muslim or Hindu neighbors are feeding the hungry and helping the poor. Are they allowed to do that? Isn’t that the reserve of Christians? Can we tell them to stop?

It sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? But that’s exactly what the disciples did. They saw someone successfully casting out demons in Jesus’ name. (In another case when someone did this in the book of Acts it backfired, because the person was using Jesus’ name as if it were a magical formula.) But this man must have had some kind of genuine faith because it worked. The problem from the disciples’ point of view was that he wasn’t one of them. He wasn’t part of the group. And so they reported to Jesus that they had told the man he had to stop. But Jesus said, “Do not stop him. For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.”

A little background here might help us understand their attitude. Immediately before the disciples encountered the man performing exorcisms in Jesus’ name the disciples themselves had failed colossally to perform a very public exorcism. It was humiliating. Jesus had to intervene and help. It must have been galling to see this man come along, this “uncertified” exorcist who was successful. They were **authorized**. He was not!

I couldn’t help but be reminded of the story in our Old Testament reading today. Two of the elders, Eldad and Medad, who had not been with the others when the Holy Spirit came upon them all, started prophesying in the camp. Joshua, Moses’ aide and right-hand man was peeved. “Moses, my lord,” he said, “stop them!” But Moses said, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!”

God is going to do what God is going to do. We cannot control God. We certainly cannot micromanage God. We have rules and God ignores them. We erect barriers and God walks through them.

But before we move on let's take a short detour and consider the elephant in the room—exorcisms. The New Testament is full of them. The ancient world thought that demons were pretty much responsible for everything that went wrong. This was an extremely superstitious world, a world of curses and amulets to protect against curses, of demons that could cause you to trip and fall, ruin a harvest or destroy a business. They didn't know anything about germs, although the more educated classes could recognize and diagnose various diseases. Epilepsy was not one of them. A person suffering from epilepsy had a demon, plain and simple. And the man who the disciples could not successfully help was healed by Jesus of epilepsy. He was having seizures. When they asked Jesus why they were unsuccessful he said, "This kind can only come out by prayer." The man may have thought he had a demon. The people may have thought he had a demon. Jesus healed him within the cultural context of his time. He healed in a way they could all understand.

Most of the time when Jesus "cast out a demon" he was in fact healing people. I say "most of the time" because I believe that spiritual evil does exist, we just don't understand it very well. You can find all kinds of books on the subject that sound like they know everything about it, but they're all fiction. This is a realm we know nothing about. But fortunately, all we really need to know is that Jesus has authority over it, and because Jesus has authority over spiritual evil, Christians have authority over spiritual evil. We just don't exercise that authority! We are *supposed* to use our spiritual authority over evil in prayer, and to pray against evil when we encounter it.

Returning to where we left off, the fact that the situation involved exorcism is beside the point. What Jesus was really teaching us is that those who work on the side of truth, love, justice, compassion and mercy are doing the work of God, even if those people are very different from us. God wants us to *join with others* for the common good. We should be working ecumenically. Working in an inter-faith ministry to achieve God's goals IS being faithful to God. It is furthermore even possible to do God's work with people who have **no faith at all**. The work of God is the nature of God revealed. Where there is goodness, there is the presence of God. We might find God in a homeless shelter, or among social workers or at a local mosque. We might see God's healing grace at work through a synagogue, a community group, or even a government office. **We don't own the franchise.** God is not limited by our ideas. But we are often troubled by a vague sense of guilt when we work outside of the church to accomplish good things. We feel conflicted, as if we should only be part of an exclusively Christian mission. But when we take this stance and pull away from those outside of the church, we actually weaken the witness of our faith. How else will people ever meet a Christian if we are not there working beside them? How else will they see that there is something different in our motivation, if we are not there honestly sharing as we labor

together for better schools, help for the refugee and the prisoner, justice for the oppressed or to protect the planet God has given us?

Unfortunately, the text that we have been given today by the lectionary then takes a sharp right and goes into an entirely different topic. We don't know if the words we read next in the text were actually spoken next, but if I were to venture a guess, I would say no. When the New Testament was written separate stories about Jesus and teachings were woven together to make a coherent whole. No one was onsite making a recording. It is likely that many of Jesus' teachings were just spliced together. I think that may be the case here because the subject matter changes so abruptly.

In this next section Jesus goes into strong overdrive using hyperbole to emphasize that there are things we should NOT do. He speaks in exaggerated language for effect. This was a classic rabbinic style. Jesus says:

- If anyone causes a new believer to stumble it would be better for them if a huge millstone were hung around their neck and they be thrown into the sea.
- If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off.
- If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off.
- If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out.

Jesus didn't mean any of these things LITERALLY. He was saying that doing the right thing is very, very, very important. He was saying, "If it costs an arm and a leg to resist temptation, it's worth it."

Sometimes we have to amputate evil out of our lives. To recover from addiction people not only need to stop using, they often need to end relationships that will lead them back into active addiction. It is a life or death situation. Jesus is putting everyone's battle with evil and sin in those stark terms.

God is at work in our world in many surprising ways, and God wants us to be hypervigilant about doing what is RIGHT, but also to be very open to seeing where the Spirit is at work. We want to hide in our churches and wait for people to cross the frontier and join us in here. But this is a foreign land for many, and we speak a strange language called "Churchianity." How often do people really use words and phrases like "Call to Worship," "Confession," "Doxology" and "Affirmation of Faith." Inside the Church "redemption" is about being freed by God. Outside the Church it's about coupons. Inside the Church being "saved" is about our relationship to God. Outside the Church it's about being rescued in a flood. Inside the Church "grace" is about God's forgiving love. Outside the Church it is someone's name.

God is at work in our world, not just in churches. It is time for us to stop being afraid and go out. We have a mission to accomplish, and the Holy Spirit will guide us to work with unexpected partners and in so doing reveal the love of God to a world in need. Amen.

Numbers 11:24-29

24 So Moses went out and told the people what the Lord had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. **25** Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but did not do so again.

26 However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. **27** A young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.”

28 Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, “Moses, my lord, stop them!”

29 But Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!”

Mark 9:38-50

38 “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

39 “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, **40** for whoever is not against us is for us. **41** Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

42 “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. **43** If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. **44** **45** And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. **7** And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, **48** where

“the worms that eat them do not die,
and the fire is not quenched.”^[c]

49 Everyone will be salted with fire.

50 “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”