

The Case of the Unauthorized Exorcist

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Mark 9:33-41

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/sermon10-21-2018.mp3>*

If you've ever done any work with children at all, the scene will be familiar to you. Everyone is in a certain place (say, Fellowship Hall), and then you need to group to move to the next place (say, the Sanctuary). You stand by the door and say, "All right, let's get ready to go. Everyone who is in my group, line up over here." And where does every single child want to be? At the front of the line! Everyone wants to be first, right? And how do they solve this? Usually there is some shouting, some pushing, and some pouting.

Jesus and his followers have been spending some time in the far north of Israel, near the community of Caesarea Philippi. Today, though, we read that they are on the move – headed south through the Galilee. You know this: when Jesus and his followers went from one place to another, how did they move? They sure didn't Uber or take a bus! They walked. And when they walked, it was impossible for them to walk shoulder-to-shoulder. The narrow paths and steep terrain wouldn't permit it. So what do they do? They line up, and they follow.

They finally get to the place where they're staying for the night and Jesus asks a question. Now, if that question sounded familiar to you, congratulations, because the same exact question came before us the last time we opened Mark's Gospel. For the second time in two days, Jesus looks at his followers and is forced to ask, "What were you arguing about?"

I wonder, Church, if we've given him any cause to ask us anything different in 2018? I mean, he's just given them some amazing (and difficult) teaching. They could have been talking

about what it meant when Jesus had spoken about the fact that the Son of Man was destined to be betrayed, to suffer, and to die. But that's not what they were talking about. They could have been reflecting on the teaching he'd given them when he healed the boy with the seizures, wherein Jesus had emphasized the importance of prayer and other spiritual practices.

But that's not what they were arguing about, is it, Church? And my first question for you all today is simply this: Has the quality of church arguments improved in the last 2000 years, or would we be just as likely to sit in embarrassed silence if he were to ask US what we've been spending so much time and energy on lately?

When no one can answer him, Mark tells us that Jesus sat down. I will tell you that is *not* the sign of a weary man looking to take a load off his feet. When an ancient Rabbi sat down in the presence of his disciples, it was a sign that he was ready to begin a formal teaching session. Jesus sat down in such a way as to communicate, "All right, boys, listen up. This is going to be important."



¹And it was. He addresses the core of their behavior on the road, and he does so bluntly. "Do you want to be first? Do you want to be great? Here's the trick: become a servant. If you want to be first – get in the last place." And in order to emphasize his point, he calls a child into the circle, takes that child into his arms, and says, "the true mark of discipleship is how you treat someone like this – anonymous, weak, 'inconsequential' in the world's eyes."

Jean Vanier was a Canadian man who, after experiencing some of the horrors of World War II, served with distinction in the Royal Navy. He was unsettled, though, and left the military to pursue a career in academia. He earned a PhD in Philosophy

¹ *Suffer the Children*, Carl Heinrich Bloch (1834-1890), detail

and wrote books on the importance of Aristotle and ethics. However, he became disenchanted with the life of a scholar and happened upon a community of severely disabled adults – and in this group he found his true vocation. He formed an intentional community, called “L’Arche”, in France, where he dedicated his life to serving and learning from these who have been most marginalized. He writes,

[These men] do not have a consciousness of power. Because of this perhaps their capacity for love is more immediate, lively and developed than that of other men. They cannot be men of ambition and action in society and so develop a capacity for friendship rather than for efficiency. They are indeed weak and easily influenced, because they confidently give themselves to others; they are simple certainly, but often with a very attractive simplicity. Their first reaction is often one of welcome and not of rejection or criticism. Full of trust, they commit themselves deeply. Who amongst us has not been moved when met by the warm welcome of our boys and girls, by their smiles, their confidence and their outstretched arms. Free from the bonds of conventional society, and of ambition, they are free, not with the ambitious freedom of reason, but with an interior freedom, that of friendship. Who has not been struck by the rightness of their judgments upon the goodness or evil of men, by their profound intuition on certain human truths, by the truth and simplicity of their nature which seeks not so much to appear to be, as to be.²

“Whoever **welcomes** one such child in my name **welcomes** me, and whoever **welcomes** me **welcomes** not me but the

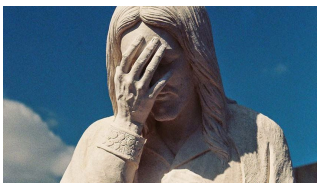
I think that Vanier was paying attention to Jesus, even if the disciples were not. Look in particular at verse 37: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the

One who sent me.” Do you see that? Four times in a single sentence wherein Jesus is seeking to communicate the essence

² Jean Vanier, *Eruption to Hope* (1971)

of discipleship he uses the word “welcome”. Do you think that he understood that to be an important hallmark of the community that would follow him?

How well did the disciples hear the voice of their master? We don’t have to wait long to find out: as soon as Jesus finishes the sentence in which he uses the word “welcome” four straight times, John – who is often referred to as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” – the one who, if Jesus had a best friend, it was probably him – John can’t wait to say, “Oooh oooh oooh – hey Jesus, we saw a guy who was using your name but not doing everything the way we do, and so we made him stop!”



You just have to know that if Jesus ever did a face-palm, it was here. “Seriously, John? All this conversation about welcoming and hospitality and humility, and the best thing that you can think to say at this very moment is this? Great googly-moogly.”

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following **us**.”

It’s telling to see what John said. He had to shut the guy down, he said. Why? “We tried to stop him because he was not following **us**.” Not, “he wasn’t following you, Jesus...” Nope. Those guys who were arguing about who is going to be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven are still

worried about it now, even after Jesus told them of the call to welcome and receive.

This situation echoes the one to which we referred in our Old Testament reading: there, Moses had felt the burden of leadership, and the Lord had told him to gather some of the elders who would join in the ministry with him. They were all to go to a certain spot and the Lord would pour out His spirit upon them. So far, so good. But then, lo and behold, a couple of the fellows who were not there wound up getting touched by the Spirit as well! Good news, right? Not to young Joshua, Moses’ assistant. Just as the disciples of Jesus tried to hush the man who wasn’t with

the Lord, so Joshua attempted to prevent these men from exercising the gifts they'd received from God. In both cases, the response is the same: "Why in the world would you want to silence the Spirit of God just because it's coming from a place that surprises you?"



Beloved, I think that there is a word from God for us here today. The call to be a disciple is a call to share, to adapt, and to grow.

Let me tell you a part of my own story. For a long time, I prided myself on a certain point of my theology. I knew what I believed and why I believed it. I could throw six or eight Bible passages at anyone who questioned me. I was devout, I was orthodox, I was, well, *right*. I spoke out about my own beliefs, and I wrote about them.

There was another person who had a different take on this issue. She sought to befriend me. At first, I was wary. Why would she want to talk? "Don't waste your breath trying to win me over to your side," I told her. "I'm not interested in being converted." She told me that was the farthest thing from her mind – she told me that she wanted to know how my spirit was touched by this thing. We met occasionally for coffee and conversation.

Not long after that, she was brought before a church court on charges relating to her position on this issue. I was called to serve as a "judge" at the trial that followed. Throughout the affair, she was never less than gracious or hospitable. I thought she was wrong – but she was never smug or accusatory.

I saw her once in the airport. When I greeted her, she mentioned that her husband was seriously ill. I asked if I could pray for him, and if we could pray there in the airport. At that moment, I realized that we were not merely two sides of an argument – we were two children of God seeking to make our way in a universe that is seemingly opposed to the intentions of

God far too often. She received my offer to pray as it was intended, and our friendship grew.

We still don't agree on everything. But I know that because God limited my ability to see her only as "the other", the mistaken, the wrong... I was able to grow and adapt in my own walk of faith. My ideas have changed. I have grown – in my intellect, in my faith, in my spirit.

I believe that the call of Jesus, echoed by Moses, is to resist any pattern that would have the church define itself by the ideas we are against, the people we want to keep out, or the things that we hate. Let us refuse the temptation – so common in America's political and cultural climate in 2018 – to "other" someone else. Whether we call it tribalism or white supremacy or Islamophobia or racism or ethnocentrism – any practice that perpetuates or even encourages us to draw stark lines between "us" and "them" can only lead to more entrenched marginalization and the fracturing of the human family. Instead, let us, as followers of Jesus Christ, commit ourselves to welcoming and even embracing those for whom Christ has died.



Edwin Markham was an American poet who was active around the turn of the last century. He captures the heart of this part of the gospel call in his whimsical little piece called "Outwitted".

He drew a circle that shut me out —
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!³

Beloved, let us never, ever, give into the temptation to add to those things that divide us. Instead, let us seek to create and contribute to a culture of tolerance, embrace, and hospitality to the end that all people might be touched by the Spirit and love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.

³ "Outwitted", by Edwin Markham in **The Shoes of Happiness And Other Poems** (1913).