

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 26, 2021
“Pulling Together” (Mark 9:38-50)

One day a man was hurrying along when he saw a friend across the street struggling with a heavy trunk in the doorway of his house. Always willing and eager to do anyone a good turn, he crossed the street to offer his assistance. *Hold on a minute, and I'll give you a hand.* So the two went at it with every ounce of strength and energy they possessed. They tugged and pulled and pulled and tugged until they both were completely exhausted. And the trunk hadn't moved an inch. After stopping for a quick breather, the helper, determined not to let the trunk get the best of him, said, *Let's keep at it. Another try and I'm sure we can get it out.* Immediately, the owner replied, *Get it OUT? I'm trying to get it IN.*

Now these two men had in mind the same goal: getting that trunk moved through the doorway. However, they were going about it in different ways. They were pulling in different directions. As a result, they accomplished nothing. But had they worked together, pulling in the same direction, the job could have been done easily and efficiently. Jesus says, *Whoever is not against us is for us.*

Unfortunately, there are times when we don't want to work with other people, even though we are trying to accomplish the same thing. And why is that? Is it because we only want to associate with people who are like us? People who think like we do (sharing our philosophes or political views), people who are in the same social or economic class as us, people who are part of the same clubs, groups or organizations as us, people who dress like we do, worship like we do...etc. Do we just want to associate with “our kind of people” – to be a part of a select group?

Now, I'm not saying it is wrong to be a part of various groups. It satisfies a basic human need to belong and be accepted. However, the different groups to which we belong can sometimes become very exclusive, much like an elite country club, whereby we discount the value of others who are not part of our particular group.

In our lessons for today, we see examples of such exclusion in both the Old and New Testaments. In the 11th chapter of Numbers, we find an overwhelmed Moses. He has done his very best at leading the children of Israel as they have wandered through the desert, but it has taken its toll on him. So he goes to God and complains that he, alone, can no longer bear the burden of leadership. In response, God agrees to appoint seventy elders to serve as Moses' helpers. Then during a public ceremony, held in the tent of meeting, the Spirit of God descends on the seventy and they begin to prophesy – a sign that their appointment was God's will.

After the ceremony, two men – Eldad and Medad – continued to prophesy. Yet these two men had not been present at the ceremony. Furthermore, they were prophesying in the camp and not in the tent of meeting. When Joshua hears of this, he urges Moses to stop them. Now even though these two men were doing something good, Joshua objected because they were doing it in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and without having gone through the proper channels. The real problem? Eldad and Medad were not part of the seventy and Joshua wanted their activity stopped immediately. But Moses is surprisingly tolerant. *If only all the Lord's people were prophets, and the Lord would put his Spirit upon them.*

Whoever is not against us is for us.

Moses recognized that even though what they were doing was unorthodox and different, God was nonetheless working through them. Therefore, they should be allowed to continue.

We find a similar situation in Mark's gospel. A man has been casting out demons – and doing so by using the name of Jesus. In those days, any kind of mental or physical illness was thought to have been the work of evil spirits. And the way to get rid of them, it was thought, was to use the name of a spirit that was more powerful so that the demon possessing the person's body would become powerless and be forced to come out. The man performing this exorcism had evidently seen Jesus' works and, having become familiar with the awesome power Jesus possessed, was using Jesus' name to combat these demons.

But John runs to Jesus: *Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.* Now, let's stop and note what John said. *We tried to stop him because he was not following US.* Not: *he was not following you, Lord,* but: *he was not following US.* The real problem for John seems to be that this man was not one of the elite twelve – not one of the intimate band of disciples whom Jesus had called to follow him and share in his ministry. And for that reason, John rebuked the man for doing a good work – a work done in the name of Christ.

And just like Moses, Jesus demonstrated the same tolerance: *Do not stop him; whoever is not against us is for us.* Jesus recognized that any good work done against the powers of evil is the work of God and, therefore, on the side of Jesus.

Imagine what a blow this was for the disciples' egos. They wanted Jesus to affirm them as his only representatives. They wanted to know that they owned the trademark and that others were infringing on what was rightfully theirs. But instead, Jesus told them to let the man do what he would do. Jesus, you see, was trying to expand their definition of what it means to follow Christ. He wanted the disciples to accept people who didn't necessarily express their faith in the same way they did.

There are times when we, too, have a hard time accepting people who do things differently from us. We might think that our way is the best. And in the religious circle, we may think that anyone who is a Christian should believe what we believe and do things like we do them. But they don't! Today's stories of Moses and Jesus offer proof of this. Both stories concern people who are somehow outside the inner circle or select group and yet exercise great spiritual powers. Eldad and Medad prophesy in the camp and the strange exorcist in Mark drives out demons in Jesus' name, each displaying the power of God.

In response, Moses challenges Joshua and Jesus challenges the disciples to consider the different channels through which the Spirit of God can work. *Whoever is not against us is for us.*

These texts issue that same challenge to you and me today. They challenge us to be open to the different ways God moves and works in the world and to be accepting of those outside our circle whose expression of faith is different from our own.

We might not be comfortable attending a church where hands are raised in praise or shouts of *Amen* are heard throughout the preacher's sermon. But that doesn't mean these ways of worshipping are wrong. They are just different, but the same God is being worshipped. Lutherans and other liturgical churches do not have a monopoly on God. God's Spirit moves when and where it will and that Spirit evokes different responses, different expressions of faith. *Whoever is not against us is for us.*

As human beings, we are severely limited. We can't know God's thoughts nor can we comprehend the myriad of ways that God is at work in the world, so we try to limit God's activity based on our narrow, human perspectives. But God's activity cannot be limited. God is not just open to our ways of worship or the ways we express our faith.

These texts today encourage us to allow God to be God and to work through those whom God chooses. We simply can't put God in a box. Nor can we state the claim that because of the way we worship or the way we arrive at and express our beliefs, we hold the one and only ticket to salvation. Salvation comes from absolutely nothing we do. It was through the precious blood of our Savior that salvation was won for ALL who believe. It cuts across denominational lines, party lines, and issues that threaten to divide us – but outside and inside our congregation.

It's true that Christ's followers will not all resemble each other or belong to the same group. And out there in the world where we live and work and play, we will encounter many Christians who do things differently. Does this mean they are not on our side? Aren't we all on the side of Jesus? Don't we all have the same goal of building up the kingdom of God? *Whoever is not against us is for us.*

If we let our differences interfere, we become much like the two men trying to move the trunk from the doorway. Although we have the same goals in mind, we are pulling against each other and defeating ourselves when, pulling together, we could accomplish so much more. Amen.