

Taking A Wider View

Mark 9: 38-41; 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11

Sid Batts

First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina

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Some years ago, I was serving another church in another city. I received a phone call from a clergy colleague in from another denomination. You might say that he and I were as different as two preachers might possibly be, both in personality and in theological perspective. But he, along with another minister, was organizing a clergy day retreat. It was to expand beyond denominational lines for the purpose of building Christian clergy and church unity. He also said the retreat would be across racial lines. God knew we needed that! Would I come, participate, and spend a day?

Months later, the day arrived for the gathering. I had said yes to attending because I wanted to be a part of something positive aimed toward building relationships among clergy and churches. So I prayed as I drove to the retreat center that day... prayed that I would be open to God and God's spirit. My prayer, you see, was also a sign of my anxiety. Those organizing the retreat were miles away from my theological comfort zone. The truth is, I often struggle with Christians from other traditions when they have very different ways and vocabulary to express their faith. I am uncomfortable with those who are "slain in the spirit" or those whose understanding of God seems less about the love and the grace of God and more about the God who resembles the class monitor. And I also feel the tension when I am among clergy or Christians who have nineteenth century ideas about the place of women in the church, or are condemning of gay and lesbian Christians who are members of our family. You get the idea.

When I arrived, my anxiety increased. In the group of about fifteen, I was the only pastor from a mainline church. And there were no African Americans. There were no Methodists, Lutherans or Roman Catholics or those who I would say are kindred spirits in the faith. And before the day was over, I had witnessed the strange and unnerving sight of clergy colleagues falling on the floor, literally, and laughing hysterically, uncontrollably as if they were spiritually intoxicated. I was told it was a sign of the Spirit's inward dwelling. Others talked about the need for a religious renewal in our city. One spoke of his belief that a black cloud had gathered over our community, a divine sign that our sinful city needed revival. To say the least, my stomach was in a knot. When I finally left in mid-afternoon, I thanked God I was a Presbyterian!

I

One day Jesus and his disciples were passing through Galilee. John, one of Jesus' disciples, and the one who apparently had a hair-trigger temper, came to Jesus saying, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us." But Jesus replied to John, "Don't stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

I resonate with John, the disciple of Jesus, for he and I are in the same boat. He apparently sees someone who is from outside their circle, doing things in the name of Jesus. I can almost hear him: "How dare him! Who does this guy think he is exorcising evil spirits in the name of Jesus? He's not one of Jesus' boys. He doesn't know Jesus. I've never seen him before. He's never been around us to hear Jesus teach. He certainly doesn't understand who Jesus is and what his ministry is about. The audacity of someone outside our circle, some upstart healer, thinking he can do things in the name of Jesus."

So I have this feeling that I would have been right there with John protesting to Jesus. Because you see, he is not one of us. Never been to a real seminary —probably went to an online Bible college. Because I am embarrassingly uncomfortable with those whose faith is different from mine, who have a different language to express their faith, who have a differing theology about what is authentic prayer and worship. I am so bothered by some of the things I see on religious cable channels, that I have, at times, reprogrammed my remote so that those channels will not come up when I am channel surfing.

I doubt I'm alone. Back in another one of my former churches, we had decided to become a refugee sponsoring church. It was a really big step because we had never done anything like that before. We would sponsor and adopt a refugee couple or family, bring them to our community and support them in their new land.

So our selection committee gathered around the table one night. We had a list of refugee families, people waiting in camps or embassies, to be chosen, sponsored by an American organization, or a church, in order to come to the states and start a new life. The list was from our Presbyterian national office and it gave short profiles of about ten or fifteen families. There were Cambodians, Russians, Poles, Vietnamese, Bulgarians and more. When it finally came down to making a selection it was between a Russian Jewish family, and a Russian Pentecostal Christian family. Finally, one of the committee members said, "Bring on the Jews." The room breathed a sigh of relief.

A side note to that story is that the Jewish family had already been selected and we eventually adopted a Bulgarian couple who turned out to be dancers and entertainers. They stole our hearts and after a year, moved to Florida where they pursued successful careers, mostly entertaining on cruise ships.

Intolerance is what we call what we do when we judge, criticize or condemn people who do not do things our way. I like the guy who said, “You worship God your way. I’ll worship God God’s way!”

Our sin in this in when we go so far as to believe that there is only one way to God... that is, our way. And that others have a substandard God and a substandard faith.

William Barclay once wrote: “It is a fearful thing for any one or any church, to think they have a monopoly on salvation.”

I find help from C.S. Lewis, that wise British Christian thinker. Lewis describes the church as a house with many rooms. There is only one door that leads into the house and that door is Jesus Christ. But in the house there are bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen, a large family room, a den, a study, sunroom and more. A house would be very uninteresting, he says, and rather monotonous, if there were not various rooms with different decor. In a house, family members have different rooms which are their favorites and where they spend most of their time.

Lewis reminds us that the church, too, has many rooms. We sometimes call them denominations. Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and a slew of independent churches. This is to say, we should not be a tearing down the walls that separate the rooms, for that would destroy the variety and beauty of the house. However, we in the Christian family would do well to respect the right of other Christians to spend most of their time in the room of their choice. In those rooms their spiritual needs are met and in them there is a place where they can flourish. And, that we must never forget that we belong, all of us, to the same household. Consequently, we work for the welfare of the whole house.

What I am hearing in this gospel story is a reminder that if anyone claims to be a disciple of Jesus, they belong to the household... and that Christian love encircles but does not exclude. What I believe Jesus was telling John, and us, is to take a wider view of our faith rather than a more narrow one. It is narrow only in the sense that Jesus Christ is the road by which we arrive.

However, some believe that denominations and thousands of different churches are sinful. I happen not to believe that. Rather, they give our house flavor and character where we can

all find rooms that comfort, nurture and challenge.... rooms where we can express our faith and our convictions. What we have to guard against is thinking our room is the only room where true Christians can be found. What we have to guard against is the arrogance that we are right and those poor misguided souls in the other rooms are spiritually inferior. Perhaps, we have to be able to say... not that all the right people have gathered in our room....but that this room is right for me, and us.

II

Now there is something else in this story that strikes me as I hear about this upstart outsider doing ministry apart from Jesus and his disciples. It is this: the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills, and endows us all with unique gifts for ministry.

If I should encounter back problems, I hope you will pray for me to be healed. But I will also go to my neuro-surgeon, who has invested years in college, medical school, residency, and years in practice as a response to God to be a healer. God cooperates for good with doctors, nurses, physical therapists, hospitals, etc., in the work of healing; they do what only they can do... and God does what only God can do. In the process, broken people are mended.

Are you with me? This is to say our gifts are different. Some of us teach. Others work with their hands. Some administer. Some manage. Others build. Some entertain. Others sell. Some count...each according to his or her gifts distributed by God.

When any of us proclaim we are Christian, our gifts then become for the service of God and God's world. God uses us. This is to say that all of us here are ministers. In some sense, it does not matter what vocation we have chosen, or been called or drawn to. I mean, part of the Reformation mantra was Luther's radical idea that the church is a "priesthood of all believers." In other words, God equips each of us with gifts to serve wherever we are. One of the sins of the church, and particularly among preacher-types, is our tendency to promote the idea that really serving God is something that primarily comes from within the church. My gosh, those of you working outside the church are the ones in the trenches who are dealing with people every day, people who are clamoring for a drink of kindness. It is those of you who live and work outside the church who are God's frontline ministers.

Who are the ministers of this congregation? You are. We are.

I remember hearing about a thirty something year old woman and mother of several children who was a medical technician in a hospital cancer unit. One day she was tending to an elderly dying man, a man so weak, he could not speak. Well, the med tech was also a gospel singer and she began to sing in the dying man's presence. When she did, he perked

up. This man who could not talk began singing along with her the familiar hymns. When he died three weeks later, his family asked her to sing at his funeral.

So began her ministry of music. Word of her volunteer ministry began to spread around the hospital and people began to request her singing. The hospital administration (at first cautious) saw the benefits of her soulful singing and gave her the green light to sing on. So she went from room to room giving out medications... and singing the old hymns.

Christ calls us to a wider view of ministry. Our ministry is only limited by our imagination.