

- I. What really hooked me in this passage is John's reaction to witnessing someone outside of the disciples casting out a demon in Jesus' name. Prior to arriving in Capernaum John and the disciples tried to exorcise a demon and couldn't do it. They had to call in the big guns to get the job done. John has since witnessed someone be successful at his job, the task to which he was called and sent forth by Jesus to complete, and is envious. "This guy? Who's this guy? He's not a disciple. He hasn't gone through leadership training, or congregational care classes. He hasn't gone before Session to be approved, or even sat in a new members class. Jesus, how could he possibly have the authority to cast out demons in your name?" John's problem is not that the exorcist wasn't following Jesus, but that he wasn't following the twelve.
- II. NT Wright states, "John wants to restrict working in Jesus' name to the official group of disciples, but Jesus has no such qualms; if someone is casting out demons by mentioning Jesus' name, such a person is honoring Jesus, and is hardly likely to be found speaking evil of Jesus and his movement. John's attitude is a symptom of a disease that afflicts the church to this day. How easy it is for any of us, especially professional clergy and theologians, to assume that the church belongs to us. How easy, too, for people who have always worshipped and prayed within one particular tradition or style to feel that this is the 'proper' way."<sup>1</sup> When I read the right Reverend's words this week I thought two things: You've gone to meddling, and thank God I'm not alone.
- III. One of the largest non-denominational churches in Atlanta is Andy Stanley's NorthPoint Church north of the city, in Alpharetta. They have several satellite campuses around the city, and over 100 partner churches in surrounding states. All these campuses have their own pastor and worship teams, but when it comes to the main event, the sermon, at the satellite campuses Andy is piped in via video from the previous week's recording. At a few of the campuses, they have some more elaborate ways of doing this, but all of this is to say NorthPoint Church has a fairly large footprint in Atlanta when it comes to the church world. In seminary I visited the main campus several times. They had an engaging mid-week service for young adults which I attended frequently. And I showed up on a couple mornings since there wouldn't be another period in my life that I would really have free time on a Sunday to visit another church unless I was on vacation. So I went, but when I went I had my nose a little bit up in the air. I knew full well the approach of many non-denominational congregations, they are really just an extension of Baptists who are free to do their own thing, they don't draw much on tradition unless they choose to do so. Plus, they didn't have to listen to anyone tell them, "Well, we've always done it this way or that way," because they were creating it as they went. So if there was a way to be more autonomous in the Baptist church, in my mind, this was it. I know this is an over simplification of that movement, but that was the mindset I went in with to worship God on those Sundays and weeknights. Unsurprisingly, I found it

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, p. 126-127

difficult to worship with this mindset. I was worried too much about staying within my worship comfort zone, instead of witnessing and participating in how God was at work in that space.

- IV. This sort of negative, visceral reaction I pretty much have to anything not within the bounds of a typical ‘mainline’ denomination service. My issues and problems run much deeper than a pastor sitting in worship and having to turn off the critiques running in the back of their mind about how I would’ve done this or that different than how the church I’m attending choose to do it. I tend to be highly critical of a worship setting that doesn’t worship the way I want to worship, that doesn’t play the music I want them to play, that has differing theology. I want my way to be the right way, the best way, the greatest way!
- V. I think for the disciple John and I, this sort of elitism is a defense mechanism. It allows us to erect blocks to protect ourselves and our preferred way of being Christian. In theology we call them essential tenets, in denominational polity we call it our constitution, and in our local churches we call it “the way we’ve always done it.” All in the name of Jesus, when in reality it is mostly in our name. Not all of these are bad. These blocks allow us to define ourselves, who we say that we are as Christians in the world, and then get specific: Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in Florida, in Tallahassee, and we are Presbyterians of the PCUSA. But there is a danger of these blocks that helped us define ourselves, becoming stumbling blocks for others. They keep others from participating in our community, they allow us to turn our noses up at other ways being Christian in the world. And therein lies the problem that I feel Jesus is calling our attention to in this passage. We forget that we are followers of Christ first and foremost, and that all other allegiances fall well short of that proclamation including country, denomination, and clan.
- VI. It was often said in my family when I was growing up, especially before we went somewhere important or preparing for some life altering event like going on my first scout trip without my parents, to prom, or off to college, that you represent more than yourself. You represent not only your first name, but your last name and that last name means something. It connects you with your grandparents, great-grandparents, and generation upon generation of Mealors who made that name mean what it does. Of course, we weren’t famous or anything, but to our family it meant we lived to a certain standard. We did things a certain way because of the traditions and values that had been passed down from generation to generation, each adding new layers but there was consistency in the essential values. The point was that we did not live only for ourselves, but for others, and because of that we had to live out those values when we were in public. The same is true for those who are Christ’s disciples. When we say we are Christians, we claim that we are followers of Christ; that we follow in a “manner consistent with his character.”<sup>2</sup> Calling oneself a Christian, and living inconsistent with

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<sup>2</sup> Martha Moore Keish, *Daily Feast*, p.480

his message of love, grace, mercy, and hope for the world suggests that we have lost our saltiness.

- VII. One commentator writes, “Disciples whose lives are not characterized by lowly service nor by openness to Christians who are different nor by care for those who are young in the faith nor by rigorous self-discipline are like flavorless salt.”<sup>3</sup> We must not be consumed by ourselves but living for Jesus. We must not be consumed by the differences that keep us apart but focused on what brings us together as brothers and sisters in Christ. We need to focus on the commonality that all Christians profess Jesus as Lord and Savior, and work together to be Christ in the world; sharing his vision of the kingdom to come in this present world. Everything else is secondary, it is all just frills. Important sure, but when weighed against what unifies us in Jesus, its importance is well in the distance.
- VIII. As we have learned over the last few weeks through following the Gospel of Mark, discipleship is difficult and requires sacrifice. Jesus’ “sacrificial death is not to shield disciples from costly obedience, but rather to show them the way.”<sup>4</sup> When we talk about sacrifice, we think about these grandiose actions, dying on the cross, cutting off limbs like Jesus mentions here. But the first step is often the hardest because we have to change our mindset and our habits, those that have come to define who we are as Christians. The church does itself a great disservice when we spend our time squabbling over which one of us is the greatest: fighting over our worship liturgy, our music, our way of being church, instead of focusing on working together to serve the kingdom; to lift up God’s name above all others. But we must sacrifice our pride, our selfish ambitions, our desire to be the greatest according to the world’s standards or even church statistical standards, and start living to be great according to the life of Jesus. How are we faithfully living our life together in reflection of Jesus? How are we doing that with our Christian brothers and sisters?
- IX. Next Sunday we will celebrate World Communion Sunday. The celebration “was adopted as a denominational practice in the Presbyterian Church (US) in 1936. Churches in other denominations were invited to celebrate with us from the beginning, but it wasn’t until 1940 when the Department of Evangelism of the Federal Council of Churches (a predecessor body of the National Council of Churches) promoted extending the celebration to a number of churches around the world that the practice became widespread. Today, World Communion Sunday is celebrated around the world, demonstrating that the church founded on Jesus Christ peacefully shares God-given goods in a world increasingly destabilized”<sup>5</sup> by oppression. I don’t know how many churches will be participating next week, or what percentage. I don’t know if Andy Stanley and the folks at NorthPoint will join us or not, but that’s not the point. World Communion Sunday allows us at the very least to focus on the universal relevance and

<sup>3</sup> Williamson, *Interpretation: Mark* p. 172

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.172

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/special-days-and-emphases/world-communion-sunday/>

need for Christ. It reminds us that we here at Fellowship do not own Jesus, nor does the Presbyterian Church. Jesus did not die to save those from Tallahassee or Florida alone. Rather, at the Table we remember what Jesus did for the world, and every time we come to the Table we profess his name above all others. We profess that we are equal in the eyes of the Lord. We proclaim Christ is Risen, and are charged to go from the table to seek his kingdom in this world. A kingdom where children are welcomed, along with all those who could be considered the least of society. May we turn our stumbling blocks, into building blocks for a brighter future together.