

**“Bearing the Name of Christ” based on Mark 9:38-41, James 5:13-20, Numbers 11:16, 24-29
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on September 26, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Many years before I was a pastor, I was talking with a pastor friend whom I love and admire. Our conversation was about an Easter Passion play that several churches teamed up to do. It was after a practice one night and I was there working on promotions for the play.

I said to him, ‘I know a lot of churches. I’d love for them to be involved, too. Should I reach out?’ He responded, ‘I’d love to see more bible-believing churches here.’ Being the person I am, I keyed in on his adjective there, and asked, ‘What do you mean by bible-believing?’ He started his response with, ‘A church that believes the Father sent his Son, to die for us and rise again, so that whoever believes in him has eternal life, and that the Holy Spirit is alive and well in our hearts.’

Before he could go further, I asked, ‘Isn’t that any Christian church?’ He said it wasn’t because a lot of churches don’t read the bible. Having attended his church and also being raised Roman Catholic, I said, ‘You do know in Catholic Churches they read a lot more from the bible than you do. You preach for longer, but there’s less scripture being read and it’s the same in mainline protestant churches.’ So, I asked about a mainline church, to which he said, ‘I’m just not sure.’

He then went into a series of other doctrines he believes are also central to Christian faith. We talked for a couple of hours that night. To be clear, he and I are still friends today and he is an amazing pastor. But on that night, I couldn’t help but feel judged by him and his narrowness. Even as he viewed me personally as within his ‘bible believing’ mold, hearing that adjective used as he used it, felt aggressive to me, as if I truly became a Christian, not in my lifelong formation, but when I joined an approved non-denominational church.

My sisters and brothers, I say this not to criticize him, for he is in good company. There are few figures in scripture more important than Joshua in the Hebrew Scripture and then John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, in the New Testament. But what today’s readings show us is that even great people of faith can fall into a trap of limiting how God acts in the world.

Years later, the pastor of the mainline church, which the non-denominational pastor doubted, was talking with me, when I expressed my desire to stop a street corner preacher in our public square holding signs with nasty messages. He would yell into a megaphone about God’s judgement and impending doom at the cars driving by. I felt like this would turn more people away from the faith, than it might ever reach with the good news of Jesus. This pastor responded in a way I’ll never forget, loosely adapting a line from Jerry Seinfeld: *‘Don’t worry about him. He’s on our team. He’s just not our best player.’*

In sports, a poor performance by one player makes it harder on everyone else, but nonetheless, they are on the same team and have the same goal. The difference, of course, is that there is no bench in Christianity, if you’re on the team, then you are playing in the game, and we are all in this together – with one goal – to share the good news of God’s presence.

The scripture that Brett read today from the Book of Numbers is part of a larger story in which the people of Israel are grumbling that God is providing only Manna to them. Yes, God is giving

them the food they need to survive, but they are upset because that is all that God is giving them. They miss the meat and fish that they had seen in Egypt while in slavery. Moses is also frustrated with God, upset the people will not listen to him. So, God answers their prayers – God gives the Israelites some quail. Well, not some quail, but so much it makes them sick. And to Moses, he gives him a little administrative help, filling the leaders in the camp with God's Spirit, to remind the people of God's presence, through the gift of prophesy.

Now, to get that Spirit, everyone was supposed to gather in the tent of meeting – the place where God's presence was supposed to dwell, where God met with Moses. But two of the leaders, Eldad and Medad, never made it to the tent. Now, it doesn't say why these two missed the meeting in the tent, just that they were registered to attend, but remained in the camp. Maybe they overslept, or maybe they were critics of Moses and didn't want to go up. We don't know, but we do know Joshua's reaction. He wants Moses to stop them from prophesying, to stop them from doing the Lord's work. They are even the only one doing this prophesying to the people and not just among themselves in the tent.

Moses responds, 'Are you jealous for me?' Moses did not want to limit the size of God's tent.

The story in Mark mirrors this, but instead of prophecy, it is shown in regard to exorcism. In Mark's gospel, exorcism plays a central role, in ways it does not in other gospels. I think this is because Mark shows us a Jesus in the role of teacher, like Socrates, which is relatable to his audience in early Rome. But Mark also wants to be clear, that while a great teacher, Jesus is truly so much more: He is the embodiment of God and the embodiment of Israel, the Suffering Servant prophesied in Isaiah, who has come to redeem the whole world. And so, exorcism reveals a battle beyond what we see, where Jesus defeats evil itself. God is present in Jesus, and this is good news.

So, when we read this, it is important to recognize the parallels in the two stories, because while each is about a gift of ministry they are different gifts. But both are also about limits, namely that we are not supposed to put limits on how God works in the world. For the Jewish believers, Jesus was not what they expected in a Messiah. This was not 'Torah-believing' or 'bible-believing' in their eyes that God became human, to live as we live, suffer, die and then rise again in new creation.

They did not interpret the Torah, or the prophets, or the writings to say any of this, just as Joshua looked at the letter of God's command – to gather under the tent – and assumed that God could not have been acting in Eldad and Medad who never went under the tent. Likewise, John is still struggling with Jesus's teaching about his own death. Remember that the first time Jesus taught them about this, Peter vowed that he would stop Jesus from being killed, and Jesus rebuked him for thinking worldly thoughts.

And when Jesus taught this for a second time, there is nothing to say Peter and John were not among those arguing, about who would be greatest. In a few weeks, we will see John asking about being at Jesus's right or left hand in power, expressing his desire to be one of the Lord's top lieutenants in the Kingdom. Like Joshua, John still sees the Word of God according to his own interpretation.

What's more, John appears to be jealous for his fellow apostles. You see, while he was up on a mountain for the transfiguration with Jesus, Peter and James, the remaining nine apostles were trying to exorcise a demon, but they could not do it. When Jesus came back, He found the disciples arguing with the people. Jesus freed the young boy of the demon. Jesus said this could only be done through prayer, and now some strangers are doing it. John is jealous for they are casting the demons out in Jesus's name – perhaps even praying to him.

John wants to forbid these exorcists because they are not among the twelve, but Jesus says that if someone does a deed of power, or literally a dynamic act, in his name, then they will not be readily able to speak a bad or evil word about him. You see, John reveals the world's 'Us versus them' mentality, one that that first pastor and then I, in the second story, struggled with. It is something that is natural for us to struggle with. We see different as something to avoid, something that is against us. But Jesus says, "Whoever is for us, is not against us." Whoever is doing dynamic things to reconcile the world to God in Jesus's name is with us, not against us. They are on our team, even if we don't like how they are doing it.

The world says, 'Whoever is not 100 percent with us, is against us.' That's why we see so much division. We see someone agree with us on several things, but then condemn them for one thing we do not agree on. Now, to be clear, this is the standard Jesus uses for 'demons,' not people, in Matthew's gospel, when he says the strong man, a reference to Satan, must be bound, and that 'The one who is not with me is against me.' But as it applies to people in the context of Mark's gospel, it is about inclusion, about a bigger tent, far bigger than Joshua or John can comprehend.

This is the tent that I believe Paul, whose occupation had been a tent maker, was building. I ask you to remember my sermon on Ephesians 4 way back in early August when Paul says the core of our faith is understanding who God is through our scriptures, namely that Jesus is the Son of God, the embodiment of God on earth, sent by the Father to be the embodiment of God's promise to Israel, that every nation would be blessed thru Abraham and Sarah. That by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we are all called to be temples of the Holy Spirit, to join in a ministry of reconciliation, to participate in God's justice. That is what it is to 'be righteous,' not by our terms, but by God's.

How do we do this? Well, once again we have the wisdom of James to help us out. If you are enduring hardship, pray. If you are cheerful in good times, still pray. If you are sick, pray and ask others to pray with you and for you, anointing you. Hardship, good times, and times of illness are all challenges to our faith. Only through prayer and community, do we remain faithful. In hardship, we can feel as if God is somehow against us. In good times, we can feel as if we do not need God. We think we are fine and have all we need. And if we are sick, then we can feel alone, separated from God's love and each other.

To anoint the sick is to affirm their place in the community, even if they are away, and James promises that it is the Lord who will raise them and forgive their sins. Still, we are all to be connected, open and honest with each other, even to confess, or tell the truth about our sins, to pray for each other, so that we might all know healing – physical and spiritual. James says the

prayers of the righteous are powerful, but righteous here is not 'upstanding and good.' Righteousness in Greek and Hebrew is justice, namely to participate in God's justice.

This is why James downplays the great prophet Elijah as being in our nature, just like us. But he was participating in God's justice, praying earnestly and he was heard. Our prayers should not be a sign that we are somehow specially favored by God, but an effort to align with God's justice, that ministry of reconciliation. This is to bring people back to the truth of God's love in Christ, to save their life, soul, or identity, again the word is '*psyche*.' This is to save them from the wrong path, and into the way of Christ, covering over, or forgiving, a multitude of sins.

Sisters and brothers, we are all on this road with Christ together, we are on the same team, not only within the walls of this church, but among Christ's church everywhere. This team puts faith in a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and it is a big tent, where there is much work to be done in the ministry of reconciliation. God calls women and men, children and adults, of every ethnicity, without regard to our intelligence, our education, our ideologies, or politics.

Our calling is to reconcile this world to God in Christ, and whoever is working toward that end, bears the name of Christ – Even you. I love the subtle joke, or at least that's how I read it, in Jesus's comment to John. After John questions the ministry of others, Jesus tells him that even you John are called. *'For whoever might give you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, truly I say to you that this person shall not have lost their reward.'* Even after John's mistake, Jesus says that if they give him a cup of water, they will not have done wrong.

Friends, none of us is worthy and there are a lot of things for us to choose to divide ourselves on, but the truth is this – Grace says that even though we don't deserve it, God loves us. God loves you. God shared in your humanity to die for us, and God's Spirit is alive in you and among us. Our job is not to put limits on God's love and calling, but to be humbled by it, recognizing that we can never fully understand how God works, but every person is beloved by God, sinner and saint alike.

All of us with faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are called to share that love. When we do this with humility, we can stop standing in opposition and judgement, and work with each other as teammates to improve our teaching and techniques. We can still stand up for those teachings and interpretations that matter to us, but do so with love, learning from each other and valuing each other's gifts. Then we will be a world-wide church community like what James describes, connected and active in prayer and good works. Amen.