

Mark 9:38-50

Pentecost 18 + Proper 21B + October 3, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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In the Name

The Word of the Lord from Mark 9:38-39: "John said to Him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in My name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

We start with these two verses about some man who's casting out demons in Jesus' name. That's a pretty big deal, but these two verses are all that we get about the man; and as far as we know, we never hear about him again. It's not quite as random as it seems, because this continues last week's lesson, where the disciples were arguing about which one of them was the greatest. Remember how that ended? Jesus put a little child, maybe even a baby, in the midst of them and said, "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me."

To do something in the name of Jesus is to do it according to His Word. To do something in the name of Jesus is to do something by faith. To receive a little child in the name of Jesus is to do so as the mouth and hands of God, caring for the child because you've been set free from sin to be a servant – and God's instrument – to those around you, even the least. As we heard last week, taking care of little kids is hardly great by the world's standards, but Jesus honors it by saying, "Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me."

The words "in My name" trigger a memory in John. "Teacher," he says, "we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." This man that John saw isn't part of the group, so what right has he got going around and casting out demons in the name of Jesus? In John's opinion, he'd better stop because he doesn't have the right membership card. But Jesus disagrees. He says, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in My name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. For the one who is not against us is for us."

Here's what we know about the mysterious exorcist: he is operating in the name of Jesus: we know this not because he's casting out demons, but because Jesus says so. That means that he is casting out demons according to God's Word, and that he is doing so by faith in that Word. He is not using the name of Jesus like some magic spell: we know from Scripture that that doesn't work. That's a misuse of God's name, breaking the 2nd Commandment and inviting judgment.

The mysterious exorcist clearly has authority from Jesus to cast out demons in His name, even though he isn't among the twelve. He has heard the Word about Jesus, and he believes it. He will not speak evil of Jesus, and he is not against Him. John should not forbid him and dismiss him, but should welcome him as a brother and resolve any differences. Beyond that, we can't say much more. This passage has been taken by some to mean that any Christian should just go around doing whatever he feels he is called to do – Jesus doesn't say anything to encourage that here. The lesson is more like this: the Lord often identifies His people and gathers them together, as He has gathered the twelve around Him; and it is good that the people of God gather together into congregations according to His bidding. When they encounter other Christians, they should work to resolve differences so that the Gospel might be proclaimed all the more. But that doesn't mean that there aren't others who believe in Christ by means of His Word, whom He will gather into heaven for eternal life.

What we can be sure about is this: whatever you do, you want it to be in the name of Jesus. Whatever you do is to be according to His Word – and thus done by faith in Him as His instrument and beloved child. And whatever you do should be done in the vocations – the callings – that God has given to you.

For perhaps a silly example, take a mother who prepares a meal for her family. She does so in her calling as wife and mother. She does so with thanks to God for His provision of daily bread, and she does so knowing that she is a redeemed child of God who is set free from sin to care for others. In preparing this meal for her family, she is doing so in the name of Jesus. However, if she breaks into the neighbor's house, and steals their dinner in order to feed her own family, she has now broken God's Word and is acting outside of her calling. Suddenly, that same meal isn't provided in the name of Jesus anymore – even if she claims otherwise.

It may sound absurd, but I'm trying very hard to be mundane. How come we go from something exciting like casting out demons to serving a casserole in the name of Jesus? Because Jesus does the same thing in our text. His next words are "For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward." Now, who would give a cup of water to one of the twelve *because* he is a disciple of Jesus? A fellow believer would. Therefore, he would be God's hands in providing that water to drink. He would be doing so according to God's Word, by faith, and according to his vocation of being a good neighbor to those in need. Therefore, he gives water to them in the name of Jesus.

Remember what we heard in last week's Gospel reading: greatness in the kingdom of God is found in service to others. Jesus became the greatest servant of all by sacrificing Himself on the cross for the sins of the world. He did so according to God's Word, trusting His Father's will and according to His calling as the Messiah. To serve in the name of Jesus is to serve as His instrument, according to His will, where He has placed you. You're not the Messiah, so you don't sacrifice yourself for the sins of the world: it's not your calling and so it would be blasphemy. You're not called to be an exorcist, as far as I know, so you don't run around casting out demons for a living, either. If you're called to be a parent, then providing food and clothes for your kids is service done in the name of Jesus. If you're called to be a student at the moment, then writing that term paper is service done in the name of Jesus. You do what God has given you to do, where He has placed you, as one set free from sin to serve. It may seem mundane to you, but it is great service when done in the name of Jesus.

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It's also a great honor to bear the name of Jesus, and so our text takes a turn. Jesus warns, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." Note, by the way, that Jesus says that a little child can believe in Him: an infant can even have faith long before an age of reason. How does a little child come to believe, to bear the name of Jesus? The name is put upon him, as in, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. As of tonight, Margaret Freya bears the name of Jesus, and the Lord knows her. To care for her is to care for one in Jesus' name. To fail to care for her – body, mind and soul – is to invite His wrath. To sin against one who bears the name of Jesus is to sin against Christ Himself.

If talk of a millstone for such sinners seems a little severe, brace yourself for Jesus' next words: "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched."

Is Jesus serious? He is, but we'd better take a closer look. First off, would it be better to enter eternal life crippled than to go to hell with eyes, hands and feet intact? Absolutely, especially since the resurrection of the dead includes eternal healing and you'd get hands, feet and eyes back for eternity.

But before you start lopping, consider this: does your hand or your foot or your eye cause you to sin? Of course not. Your hands and your feet and your eyes do what your mind tells them to do. Therefore, it would seem that you should get rid of your mind if it is the cause of your sin, but that's an inadvisable plan as well; and really, your mind is only acting on behalf of your nature. Jesus' point is this: if you are to be holy before God, you need to get rid of whatever causes you to sin. And what causes you to sin? You do, with your old sinful nature goading you to do the wrong thing.

So if you're to be holy before God, all you have to do is get rid of you. And that is more than you can do.

But it can be done. It has been done in Holy Baptism: by water and the Word, you were baptized in the what? In the name of Jesus. Your old sinful nature was put to death and you were raised up a new creation. You were transformed from sinful enemy of God to beloved child, because you were joined to Jesus, to His death and resurrection. So you're not saved by your work of removing body parts – you're not saved by any of your own works at all. There's no need for amputations – or even scourges and nails. It's all been done for you. You're saved because the Lord takes the old, sinful you, washes you clean in His name, and raises you up a new creation.

Beware. As Luther noted, your old sinful nature was drowned in baptism, but that dude sure can swim. Daily, you're tempted to tolerate and excuse your sin, to keep your favorite sins around and dismiss them as no big deal. Heed Jesus' warning: it would be better to amputate than to hold onto that sin. But don't amputate. Repent. Confess the sin and be forgiven, renewed as a child of God.

Take the teachings of this text together, and this is what you get: how blessed you are to bear the name of Jesus. He has saved you – hands, feet, eyes and all because He offered His body – hands, feet, eyes and all – to death on the cross in your place. He is risen from the dead – and so He has raised you from death to life in Holy Baptism. You're a new creation, His beloved child; and as His beloved child, you're His hands and feet and voice in service to those around you. You serve others in His name because He has put His name upon you. The kingdom of heaven is yours because you were baptized in His name. You live in His name. Whatever the world might think of you, you bear the name of Jesus, and the Father sets His angels over you.

Oh, rejoice! Rejoice because all this is yours, because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen