

Friend or Fraud

Numbers 11: 24-29

Mark 9: 38-48

When I was in grad school, my wife and I were just scraping by. I got a call one night from a solicitor, a young woman setting up people for a time share presentation. I explained there was no way I would be buying a time share; I'm a grad student and we're just scraping by. She was insistent that if we simply attend the sales presentation, we would get a \$50 savings bond. My wife did work full time, so she said we were qualified. I said "yes" because at that point \$50, or even \$25 if I cashed in the bond, sounded pretty good for just listening to something and saying "no" at the end. My wife was not happy with me.

We went to a hotel meeting room. The sales woman was excellent, pretty much assuring us of the fantastic opportunity that owning a time share at Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire would provide us, and the wondrous possibilities of vacationing anywhere we wanted in the future. When it came to decision time, I told the sales woman what a wonderful job she had done, however I'm a grad student and we're just scraping by. Thanks for the sales presentation; I'd like my \$50 savings bond. We went back and forth a few more times before she realized that this couple was not a sale. She tells the sales manager.

Of course, the sales manager comes over to try to close the deal. After he pushed things along, I have to tell him: "I'm a grad student and we're just scraping by. We won't be buying a time share and I'd like my \$50 savings bond." The sales manager goes over to his boss and we get ushered over to his table. The boss says that the offer wasn't intended for student *households*. I shrugged my shoulders and said that I explained that to the young woman who called, but she insisted that I qualified. I got my \$50 savings bond and my wife has never forgiven me for the whole thing. Just mention Lake Winnepesaukee to her and she'll roll her eyes behind her head.

I didn't mislead anyone; I was candid about our situation and what could be expected all the way through. We did everything that we were expected to do to get our \$50 savings bond. But it wasn't supposed to work the way it did.

Today's scriptures take us into that gray area of trying to figure out what went wrong, and in fact whether something is wrong, and with whom it's wrong.

Looking first at the passage from Numbers, we find a frustrated Moses has just had a mighty rant at God. Moses is fed up to here with these insufferable, whiny people, certain that if they had all they wanted, they'd still complain that it wasn't enough. Moses needs help in dealing with this cranky group of wanderers. God tells Moses what to do. Moses brings the elders to the Tent, the tabernacle – their mobile worship center. There are seventy of them there.

In the tabernacle as the presence of the Lord came down, Moses was somehow able to take the Spirit of God and place it on the seventy elders present. The result was

that the elders began prophesying. We don't know exactly what such prophesying means here in the Moses era of the Old Testament any more than knowing exactly what happened at Pentecost. In any case, the 70 are put in an exceptional spiritual state. It happened only this one time.

Now, 70 is an unusual number because it lacks numeric symbolism. It would be much better if the number were a divisor of twelve for the twelve tribes of Israel for instance, something like 72. Well, then we discover that 2 of the elders didn't go to the tabernacle like they were supposed to. Ah, now it makes sense – there *were* supposed to be 72 elders there!

The text's attention now turns to the 2 delinquent elders. Moses' act to place the Spirit on the elders somehow went outside the tent and even reached the 2 missing elders, Medad and Eldad. They begin prophesying much to the surprise of a young observer who then runs over to Joshua, Moses' right hand guy. He tells Joshua about it, and Joshua is appalled. Joshua urges Moses to stop them from prophesying. Moses dismisses his complaint by saying that he wished **all** of God's people were prophesying, and that was the end of the matter.

Joshua saw the gift of prophecy as a strange, special privilege, granted to a special few. The 2 absent elders had missed the big event. They weren't on the inside, belonging to the select group. There was something wrong about them prophesying outside the bounds of the sanctuary. They shouldn't be allowed to do that.

Moreover, Joshua may have thought that this sacred gift from Moses was a possession that Moses actually handed out – not unlike how it's described in the text, that Moses **distributed** the Spirit of God onto the elders. These 2 absent elders possessed something that they had **not** actually been given. In Joshua's view, this "theft" of the Spirit should be rectified by Moses, by taking away the gift of the Spirit.

On the other hand, Moses realized that this gift of prophecy was a blessing. It wasn't Moses' blessing; it was God's. Moses chose to share this blessing, not claim it as his property. A lesser individual might have tried to claim it as their personal possession. Not Moses who knew that any gift from God was meant to be shared as a blessing for all. That's a helpful attitude, a faithful attitude, recognizing God's desire for **all** to enjoy every blessing. Joshua missed the point here and was taught by Moses to celebrate God's blessing which is meant for all.

Such an attitude would have been beneficial for the disciples to adopt as we turn to the passage in Mark. Here again, the disciples have been on a streak of missing the message and hence the mission. That wrong-headedness won't change just yet.

John, son of Zebedee, in a rare moment of **actually speaking** in Mark, has seen a man driving out demons in the name of Jesus. Like Joshua in the previous passage, John believes that man needs to stop. John makes his reasoning clear; "because he is **not** one of us." Ah, so you need to be "one of us" to do good things in the name of Jesus. John, too, has missed the point, believing that doing the good works of Jesus is the

exclusive domain of the disciples alone. Only authorized, card-carrying club members should be allowed to do things that Jesus wants done. Mark has shaped the irony nicely because in the preceding section the disciples had been unable to exorcize a demon themselves. Here we find John criticizing someone for doing what he couldn't do.

Like Moses dismissing Joshua, Jesus dismisses John's complaint. He ends his remarks saying, "Anyone who gives a cup of water in my name will certainly not lose their reward." It comes out not sounding quite right. What Jesus means is that someone who is helping, say, giving a drink of water *in the name of Jesus* will not be condemned for their thoughtful action. They will not be condemned for **not** being "one of us," and for using Jesus' name in doing something caring and compassionate.

Jesus has always been aware that his mission and ministry must be bigger than his single presence, hence these disciples. And his disciples also must learn that Jesus' mission and ministry *must* be greater than *their* number if it's to have any lasting impact. In fact, that someone would be doing such a thing *in Jesus' name* should be a cause of celebration, not condemnation.

Jesus says, *Whoever is not against us is for us*. Jesus' words reach out to include others (those *not against us*) while still aware of clear, identifiable threats to this ministry – those who really are "against us."

The disciples' attitude causes Jesus to have an extended rant of his own, using extreme examples to make a point. These dismemberment verses are meant figuratively, not literally. The violently harsh examples are intended to focus the disciples' attention on what their role is in relation to the Kingdom of God. You catch this key Kingdom reference point when Jesus said: *It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell*.

It is not about protecting turf from people who are actually helping the movement and doing its work. Rather the warning is not to be some screw-up who misrepresents Jesus' ministry, thereby misleading one of the "little ones" into sin, or repelling them away from Jesus' ministry. Better you should lose a hand, a foot, or an eye than let such an abomination occur, corrupting Jesus' name and mission, and thereby losing the Kingdom's promise of new life.

What would this corruption look like? We have plenty of examples in very popular Christian figures today. We have folks who spew hate for Jews, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, anyone who is not a Christian, or even *the right type* of Christian. We have predatory preachers who tirelessly fleece their flock of money. We have good Christian folks who **defend** oppression and exploitation, and also **condemn** efforts to bring justice. These folks are the ones who are wrong. The focal point of Jesus' good news is to break through barriers with love and compassion, not erect new ones that diminish others and promote injustices contrary to Kingdom values.

Jesus wants us to keep this message before us: *Whoever is not against us is for us*. Jesus wants us to recognize that those who are doing the work of ministry just as

Jesus had instructed, even though they are **not** Christians are nonetheless serving the will of God. The Jew who is sharing a *mitzvah* – a blessing, or the Muslim who is acting charitably, or the Hindu who feeds the poor, or the Buddhist who calls for peace, all of these different faiths seem aware of Jesus' good news, and offer an image of Jesus' way in their own faith. And there are even those with no professed religious motivation who act selflessly in ministering to the least of God's beloved. I know an avowed atheist who leads a team several times a month in feeding people at Brother's Keeper soup kitchen. None will be condemned for their compassionate work. Finally, even those whom society at times may regard as unworthy can also act as Jesus would want his best servants to model in their witness to the world. There is nothing wrong here.

Let's be sure we realize that our faith and our ministry are never **ours**. Our mission must always seek to be an extension and reflection of the way of our Lord. We do not possess this mission as our unique commodity, something we must jealously guard, ration, or restrict to suit our own narrow purposes. Such an attitude invites corruption, exploiting what has been entrusted to us for unworthy purposes. Better that we should lose an arm or a leg than corrupt the way and the word of the Lord.

May we realize that God's work is our responsibility, and yet we are **not** alone in serving the Kingdom. God has called all of his creation to such service, finding many ways to draw servants from all walks and traditions to perform his will and advance his Kingdom promise of life. Woe to us if we should miss the mission because we're focused on the wrong thing. Many in God's creation strive in their own way to work to heal and reconcile, to bring peace, justice, and new life to all. That is the mission we all share.