

One of the things I just love about scripture is that the stories we read and hear are truly **our** stories. They are about **us** and tell us so much about **our** identity as human beings. And, today's reading is so very enlightening.

In our first reading from Numbers, we find that Moses is truly overwhelmed and weary as he tries to lead this throng of Israelites through the desert. And, as he complains to God about his heavy workload, we find that God is sympathetic to Moses. God graciously responds with a proposal that will take some of the burden off Moses by having others share the load. Wow! What a concept! Well, this is a great idea, but when God takes some of the spirit that was on Moses and places it on seventy chosen elders, some of that spirit spills over on two other men, Eldad and Medad. Then, when **these two other men** begin to prophesy – oh my! Envy, self-ambition, and jealousy break out among Joshua and the rest of the seventy because these **other** two men were **not** part of that chosen inner circle of seventy. And, what is so fascinating is that, rather than stop these two other men, Moses says with certainty that he wishes **all** God's people would be filled with such a spirit.

Then, in today's Gospel reading, we hear a story that is very similar. John comes rushing up to Jesus in a panic, all out of breath. He proclaims, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him – because he's **not** one of us." Again, oh my! Eldad, Medad, John and the other disciples are so much like us! People are in crisis, there is so much to be done and help is needed. Yet, when help comes, people complain because the help is not "*the right help!*" You know – they are not people we know and trust; they are not properly authorized, credentialed people who look and act like us. You see, the problem is that the Spirit has broken out and now it **cannot** be controlled! Those in the "inner circle," the "club," or the "clique," are put out because someone outside that circle is also able to use God's gifts, and that person is using them **without** the "proper" credentials.

The writer of Mark's gospel tells us the disciples are upset because this other guy who **isn't** one of the twelve is casting out demons, they can't control him, and he must be stopped. So, Jesus, never one to be impressed with titles or credentials, says in effect, "Look, leave him alone, we need all the help we can get. I don't care if he is a part of our little group or **not**. Look at what he is **doing**, **not at** the color of his skin, the language he is speaking, his sexual preference, or his politics. Is he doing

good? Is he living a kind, helpful life of love? That's all I want. We need more people like that. Whoever is not against me is for me. If he's not an enemy, he's an ally." Jesus then talks about stumbling blocks and, in a manner of speaking, tells the disciples and each one of us to look at the stumbling blocks we place in front of ourselves and others. He is telling us to look at the perverse pleasure we take in excluding people who live, believe, worship, serve, and practice their faith differently than we do. Look at how smug and superior we often feel when our brothers and sisters fail. Look at how insecure and tenuous our own faith must be, if its survival depends on our dismantling someone else's.

In this present age, Jesus' response is very helpful because if ever the Church needs more Eldads and Medads and outsiders, it is now! Quite honestly, those of us clinging to "the way things have always been done," and those who cling to rules and rubrics that exclude regarding worship leadership, or any other aspect of church and ministry, are killing the Church. **We** have far too often **become** the stumbling block of which Jesus speaks. Far too often, we tend to think that whoever is not **for** us is against us. It is so much easier that way. Far too often, we smugly think "I am not like one of them." We so readily draw circles around ourselves and others so we can better **distinguish** ourselves versus all others and thereby

**justify** who we **are** and who we are **not**. You know, I am not one of those Republicans or I am not one of those Democrats. I am not one of those conservatives or I am not one of those liberals. I am not one of those Baptists, or one of those Episcopalians, or one of those Catholics, or one of those fundamentalists, or one of those Muslims. I am not one of those whom I believe is **not** saved. Oh, yes, we do draw our circles. But, we really should understand that wherever we draw that circle, Jesus is going to be standing **outside** the circle with a great number of people who **we** might well think are not for Jesus at all.

Quite frankly, at the heart of our human struggle, as we live in relationship to others, is our need to define ourselves as who we are **not**. And, keeping categories of “them” and “us” means we do not have to leave what is familiar and comfortable, we do not have to go to a place that is scary. As we think about our life in this present culture, life that is bursting at the seams with division, differences, and even hatred as we place people in categories of *us* versus *them*, the many problems we face are so complex. However, the starting point as we work for healing means going beyond our circles, moving beyond the categories of “us” and “them.” These categories are truly stumbling blocks. The starting point is that place

where we begin entering into relationship with *others*, loving others as they are, and living in such a way that we truly care for our neighbors.

So, I ask you this. What would it be like if the children of God truly helped each other succeed? Just imagine what it would be like if Pentecostal Christians began removing the stumbling blocks for the liturgical Christians, and Lutherans began removing stumbling blocks for charismatic Christians, and Christians began removing the stumbling blocks for Muslims. Just imagine what it would be like if liberals began clearing paths for the conservatives and conservatives began clearing paths for liberals, and the difference that would make in people's daily lives. Just imagine what the world would be like if the insiders befriended the outsiders. Just what would happen if we expanded the circle, lengthened the table, and decided to simply feast together? We would be **path clearers** and **stumbling block removers!** We would be healers and exorcists and **no little one would ever lose her way again because of us.**

Living in relationship with all types of people we would consider "other" was a **constant** starting point for Jesus. When the disciples came complaining about this "other" person casting out evil spirits in Jesus' name, Jesus said, "Don't stop them! Whoever is not against us is for us."

You see, for Christians, the starting point is never about who we are **not**. It is always about who we **are**, and who we are is the baptized, broken, but graciously and abundantly loved body of Christ. There is no need to justify who we are because we have been named and claimed by a God of love. We have been given a place, a status, and a home within that gracious, unending, all-encompassing love of God. And, the Jesus we know died not only for us but for the **entire world**. We have **already** been raised to new life that is not simply about us but life for the **entire world**. And, in that love there is **no** distinction, no “us” and no “them.” So, I say, “Gracious God, break into our lives. Bring into our lives those we consider ‘other.’ Bring others into our lives and take **us** into the lives of others. Help us to let go of our fear and move beyond our self-imposed circles and categories.” Yes, this will take us to places where we will feel uncomfortable and unsettled. And, this will take us to places that will likely make life messier than we might like because we will have to give up our need to control. But, it is truly the **deeper** place where we will find **all** are embraced and held in God’s love.