

26 Ord, Sunday B
Numbers 11:25-29; James 5:1-6; Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48
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Notre Dame Church (Michigan City, IN)
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The year before I was ordained a priest, I did an internship at a parish in Aurora, Indiana, located on the Ohio River. The church had been built in 1864, a time of massive immigration from Europe. In those days, like today, ethnic groups stuck together, got help from within their own communities, and established their own parishes. In cities like Chicago or Gary, ethnic Catholic churches were found on just about every other block. One's ethnicity seemed more important than being Catholic.

In smaller towns like Aurora, Indiana, ethnic groups were forced to share churches. St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception, where I served, had two statues that represented its history. On the left side of the sanctuary was a statue of Saint Patrick, Ireland's patron saint. On the right side of the sanctuary was a statue of Saint Boniface, Germany's patron saint. In the early decades of the parish, the Irish were expected to sit on the left side of the Church, and Germans on the right.

Also in those days, there was a practice known as pew rental. Pew locations were bid on and auctioned off. And so, the pastor told me, a German parishioner might furtively raise the bid on pew locations on the Irish side, or vice-versa, an Irish parishioner might furtively raise the bid on pew locations on the German side, just to irritate or get back at a business rival or to register a grievance. So much for the word catholic meaning universal, and Christianity representing charity!

Human nature is inclined to the desire to belong to special or inside groups. Of course, it's nice for people to feel as though they belong or are "insiders" somewhere. But maybe the church and society need to create less of that feeling? Perhaps there can be too much of "us" versus "them." Certainly that is what Moses and Jesus suggest in today's readings.

In the first reading, two Hebrew elders miss an important meeting. Some one complains about them. Why should they be included in God's work if they missed the meeting? Moses responds to the effect that if they are effective in their work (prophesying), if they are serving God, what's the issue?

In the Gospel, the apostle John complains that he saw someone successfully performing exorcisms using Jesus' name, even though that person wasn't a follower. But Jesus wasn't concerned about creating a club. Yes, he did symbolically choose twelve apostles as the foundation of a renewed Israel. But the Lord's primary mission was to announce the dawning kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is about a new world, a world of peace, a world of justice, a world of harmony among all peoples, a world that gives praise and thanks to God. Anyone who works for that kind of world is doing God's work, no matter who they are.

John's confusion could have been well-intended. He had already seen and done things with Jesus that nobody had ever seen happen before. It could'nt have been easy to understand that the God-given power behind miracles was not reserved to the disciples alone. Jesus took a decidedly inclusive response to elitism. He realized that the work of God isnt a private or privileged affair. After all, he chose young men, fishermen, and tax collectors as his Twelve in the first place, and many women were his followers. Jesus had a larger cosmic perspective, and when, as he would say on one occasion, "the fields are ready for harvest," it's all hands on deck.

We experience so much of the world today as "us" versus "them." Consider the tribalism in our politics. There are gender issues: Men and women are being pitted against each other. We have nativism versus immigration. We have always had racism, but now it has become acceptable to embrace it and act on it openly, white nationalism being endorsed by some leaders. The soul of the Church is being fought over between conservative and progressive Catholics. Clergy and laity are being divided by mistrust. A small clique of bishops is trying to undermine the ministry and teaching of Pope Francis.

One of the great gifts of the Second Vatican Council was the ecumenical movement. Since then, Christians no longer need to be defined by their differences of ritual or denomination. We no longer need to avoid each other. Instead Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims are working together for the good of humanity and the betterment of the world. That is what matters. That is what Moses and Jesus are telling us.

The seventeenth century Catholic heresy of Jansenism adopted some beliefs of the Protestant reformer, John Calvin. Calvin believed in predestination, meaning that God has already decided who will be saved and who will not be saved. One is either chosen or not chosen. Calvinists and Jansenists did not believe in free will. The Catholic Jansenists illustrated this in the design of their crucifixes. For Jansenists, the nailed arms of Jesus on the cross are almost vertical, his body hanging from those arms like a deadweight. This was to suggest that Jesus died only for some, the predestined. Traditional crosses have Jesus hands and arms horizontal, as if to embrace all of humankind. Today you will see both designs in churches. That's because there has been a tendency in the church art of recent centuries to express realism (Jesus' bloody suffering) rather than symbolism (what the crucifixion means).

All human beings, whoever we may be, are called to work for the salvation of all, in this world and in the next. *Who* does this is not for us to judge. What we must judge is whether or not you and I are doing the work Jesus has called us to do.