

St Pius & St Anthony 26th Sunday Ordinary Time Year B2

Helping? Not helping? Don't we have such a patient Shepherd! Imagine the thoughts running through Jesus' mind, in the gospel today, when John tells him (almost proudly) that "we ran into a man doing work in your name (casting out demons) and don't worry we cut him off - we stopped him!" John interrupted the ministry of an exorcist bringing peace to others, in the Name of Jesus. I'm sure that unknown exorcist, thought "No good deed goes unpunished-I am helping- and these apostles attack me and shut me down!" Again, don't we have such a patient Shepherd. Jesus simply and matter of factly responds, "Don't prevent him..." (9:39-40). Jesus could have said, "**You did what?** No, don't stop him, but join him." What was John thinking? John does say "we" (v.38), so at least one accomplice is with him (*was it brother James? They were called 'Sons of Thunder' Mk 3:17-could imply they thought they were 'enforcers'.* But what led him to 'stop' good ministry in the name of Jesus? Maybe it was well-meaning – John's stated defense is that the exorcist "doesn't follow **us**" (v 38). Us? As in John. Well, last I checked, we were all called to follow 'Jesus', not 'John'. What might John have meant? Maybe the man wasn't dressed like they were, maybe he spoke a little differently than them, maybe he prayed or preached a little longer or little shorter than them. But no matter what, John is clear that they put an end to the unknown man's good work. Again, maybe John was well-meaning, but he created controversy instead of collaboration with the man (inhibiting ministry instead of inspiring it). I step back and hear Jesus thinking, "Stop already-you did the opposite of what I called you to do." Recall that Jesus had sent the disciples out to make sure demons were cast out to bring such peace to people (Mark 6:7). And what does John do here, but he 'casts' out the 'exorcist-doctor' instead. John troubles the one who is taming the tormenting spirits, creating more friction among people. I like to point out how Jesus would be especially sensitive this misguided maligning of a good exorcist, as He was already unjustly accused by the scribes (Mark 3:22) of casting demons out because He Jesus was one of them-himself a devil! Jesus could have responded, "You want to throw something out, get rid of the demons, not the good workers." Following this episode, Jesus goes on to teach about importance not only of the work (getting it done), but also the 'witness' (how it is done) of His ministers in His Name. We must strive to 'look like' Him. He is warning us, His disciples, to make sure we are truly 'helping' not 'hurting' His cause. All of His talk about 'scandal' and leading 'little ones' astray

(to sin) is meant to challenge us to discern ourselves (am I helping, is this helping?) and ensure that we are serving the good – our own or anyone else’s – I should be just as energetic and joyful about anyone’s good ministry in Jesus’ name. Jesus is bringing up the whole issue of ‘territorialism’ or ‘competition’ in ministry (*like we saw in the first reading about the 70 prophets being jealous over the other prophets, Eldad and Medad’s, ministry in Number 11*). *Jesus says there is no place for such jealousy and envy His ministry – there’s too much to be done (Matthew 9:37-38 “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest”)*

An interesting note here about the disciples’ possible motive, in stopping this other exorcist, is that earlier in this same chapter of Mark 9:18-19, a man had brought his son **to the disciples** for a healing exorcism with no success, and then the man goes on to appeal directly to Jesus, “Heal my son please, your disciples tried but they **“weren’t able”**.” (ohhhhh okay now, here is a little insight into the intention (conscious or not) of John and the others- they are jealously acting out, “since they couldn’t do it, no one should- it makes us look bad!”

But for whatever reason, Jesus is warning us all that we can easily work against His kingdom as well as for it, if we are not discerning and prudent about our ministry. Are we helping or are we not?

Maybe we’ve been in similar situations where we mistakenly or mischievously (like apostles) got in the way of someone else’s good work. I’ll offer an example: Way back in high school, at work once, my boss asked me to come help him change out some fluorescent bulbs. There were two banks of lights, that were completely out. So, I get the ladder and he removes cover, and tells me to go get four new bulbs from the storeroom. I go off and get them. He changes out two, hands them to me get rid of them, and he keeps working, I go off to dispose of them and get the idea at the door of the big metal dumpster, to have a little fun (whistle while you work, right!). Sliding open the side door, I step back and take aim, and throw them like javelins in to the dumpster. I was imitating an old David Letterman segment on his show when he throw random things from the top of 5story building just to see what it would do-look like (bag of flour, watermelon, big Jello mold, fluorescent bulbs). When he had thrown his bulbs down, he chanted “Look I am Zeus, God of thunderbolts” and threw them, so I did too, and watched them explode in clouds of white dust!. I go back into store and Gary was standing there all puzzled and said “I changed all bulbs, and they are all still out-it must be the ballast, go get those bulbs-they were good!” Yes, I confessed to him, and he was a Letterman fan too, so it turned out fine!

But my point in all of this: Was I helping or not? That is what Jesus is asking of us to discern when we minister in His Name. Not just the work, but the witness of how I work? Am I reflecting Christ to others? We hope it would never happen, but do some people charge that they will never be a Christian (saying, "If that is how they are, I don't want that") because of how they were treated by self-claiming Christians? That exorcist attacked by John, he may have continued on his good work despite such discouragement, but he may not have either. So, Jesus calls us, to watch our witness. Certainly, we don't want to stop others from any good work of 'casting out demons' as the disciples did in today's gospel, so we must be careful to cast out of ourselves what could lead others away from Christ (*that was what Jesus meant by all the 'cutting off' talk -think of that phrase instead as 'cutting out' any mischief in us like John's-anything that works against Jesus' ministry*). So Jesus calls us to be on guard about possible 'demon-sins' in ourselves that might work against our good witness. He challenges us to better 'reflect' Him to others, and to always welcome 'other' witnesses along His Way.