### “A Deed of Power” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 29, 2024

**James 5:16–20**

16 Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. 17Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

**Mark 9:38–41**

38John 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.” 39But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. 40Whoever is not against us is for us. 41For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.”

The common thread that ties the two Scriptures together seems to be the idea of a good deed that has saving effect. Personal intervention to save a fellow from sliding into sin is the theme at the end of the James passage, In describing saving a wandering fellow, he says that this act will “cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:20). This implies that you can rescue a brother from sin, persuading him to get back on the right track. Mostly we recognize that we can’t make people choose anything; everybody makes their own mind up. But it also is true that friends can sometimes persuade friends, can influence them in the right direction. If the time is right, it can happen. You can’t force it to happen. But you can pray about it.

James starts by discussing the power of prayer, and then moves to the idea of helping a brother who has strayed. Good will and faithfulness tie these two points together. It takes faith to pray effectively, and it takes faith to care about a straying friend and to act upon it. Faith and experience will guide you in taking that first step.

The Mark passage is all about someone whom the apostles don’t know, but who is doing deeds of power and preaching independently of them. Jesus affirms that he is with them, rather than against them, and they should not be concerned. Every good deed is rewarded, Jesus seems to be saying, from just giving a cup of water to doing a great “deed of power.” Mother Theresa, building on something Saint Therese of Lisieux said, wrote “**In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love” (**[www.littleflower.org/therese-facts/st-therese-mother-teresa](http://www.littleflower.org/therese-facts/st-therese-mother-teresa)**). She also put it this way: “D**o ordinary things with extraordinary love**” (www.ncregister.com/news/do-ordinary-things-with-extraordinary-love).**

Jesus is encouraging the apostles to be tolerant and open to outsiders who are doing good. That’s a different kind of faithfulness, the faith to believe that there is independent good that need not be brought under social control. The apostles are concerned with control—“this guy is doing things without our knowledge or permission!” They say “he was not following us” (Mark 9:38). But Jesus says leave him alone. He couldn’t do deeds of power if he was going to become an enemy. “Whoever is not against us is for us” (9:40), he says. He wants the apostles to trust that this unknown minister is worthy of his reward, as is anyone who even so much as gives a cup of water. There is an astonishing generosity of spirit to Jesus.

Jesus places the doing of good above the question of one’s affiliation. This unnamed guy is not affiliated with the apostles. No matter. He is doing good, he is doing “a deed of power,” and that’s what counts. With Jesus, there is neither guilt by association, nor innocence by association. It doesn’t matter whom you know, or with whom you are allied. There’s no good ol’ boy club with Jesus. But there *is* goodness, *genuine* goodness, and that’s all that counts.

Jesus’ position is also *just*: he wants the apostles to be fair to this unknown individual, and to anyone who does good. Don’t assume they have to be part of your group. There is a lot of good outside of your group. Should be obvious, right? But it’s not always obvious to group-oriented humans, who have learned there is power—*worldly* power—in numbers.

The apostles seem to be stuck in *groupthink*, the place where the group thinks it knows everything, and where the majority suppresses all independence, and imposes its will upon any dissidents that there may be. But Jesus defends the independent teacher, and he would defend the independent thinker in our churches today, not because the independent thinker is always right, but because he has a right to do his good deeds without being taken under control.

If churches had been more open to independent thinkers like Jan Hus, Martin Luther, and William Ellery Channing, there would be fewer divisions and doctrinal wars. Spiritual unity does not require doctrinal agreement and conformity in all things. Real unity is not the unity of a dictatorship; it is not coerced. Rather, it is a unity of shared motives and values, accompanied by tolerance of intellectual diversity and differing interpretations. Think of Habitat for Humanity, where individuals from many walks of life and different viewpoints, including former President Jimmy Carter, come together to build homes for the poor.

Groups of this kind can handle diversity, even independence, in its members. Mature kinds of unity do not require mindless conformity. Our unity consists in the fact that we all *hope* alike and we all *aspire* alike, not that we all *think* alike. This is the kind of attitude that can say “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Our inner guide already knows these truths. So follow your inner light. It can encourage unity, especially when working for a common goal.

Tonya Frazier, a community navigator for Central Berkshire Habitat, has seen a renovation of neighborhoods through the efforts of Habitat for Humanity. Further, “We’ve seen a complete shift from people feeling very shut off to people asking for help and searching for resources” ([www.habitat.org/stories/habitat-and-residents-forge-legacy-change-massachusetts-community](http://www.habitat.org/stories/habitat-and-residents-forge-legacy-change-massachusetts-community)). Community navigators team up with local residents to plan affordable housing along with access to social services such as mental health resources, with an aim of revitalizing whole neighborhoods and helping people in need. Theirs is a unity of service and of meeting needs. Where can you be of service? One form of service would be promoting unity among those who travel in different groups but have a similar spiritual motivation. “Whoever is not against us is for us.”