

I'd like to share with you a story from a day on the job I had last year. It starts out by getting up really early on a Sunday morning. Hopefully I haven't lost you yet. Even if you can't relate, stick with me. It gets better. This was also while winter was in full swing. Snow everywhere, everyone's favorite thing to talk about, especially at the end of September. Well, my job was to take care of various yard work and maintenance items and this included clearing off the parking lot, entryways and sidewalks before the services on Sunday. This takes time of course, between the shoveling, snow blowing, and salting. For awhile I was the only person on the block as far as I could tell, working away in the quiet, fairly dark morning hours. Eventually some other folks arrived, still in plenty of time for church. A few had brought shovels and started to help out my cause. I couldn't tell you what exactly their motivation was to do so, but by joining the cause they made things easier and allowed for others to reach the church doors without much trouble or having to trek through piles of snow. I also thought about how this particular task was a part of my job description and the other people were not getting paid for their share of the work. Despite having these thoughts I didn't go up to them, tap them on the shoulder and say, "Hey! What are you doing?" and try to keep them from helping clear the area. That would be silly. In today's gospel we hear about a group of workers, the disciples, who stopped a man from doing something truly incredible, casting out demons in the name of Jesus! Can you imagine how Jesus reacted to this development? As we look closer at the text before us my goal is to impress on you this thought -

Let Nothing Hinder the Gospel

Other Hearts Need to Hear

Your Heart Needs Not Fear

Maybe you can recall from last week, if you were able to hear about the disciples' big argument, the issue that invaded Jesus' closest group of followers. They were arguing over who was the greatest, who surpassed the others! The disciples were struggling with their reputations and where they stood in the grand scheme of things. They found themselves on one big ego trip with the Savior of the world walking not too far from them. Once they had come to the next city Jesus pulled them aside and took a child into his arms to show that if you welcomed the lowly child you would be welcoming him, even God the Father who sent him. This served as a lesson in humility meant to teach the disciples about God's perspective on the greatness debate and to direct them along a better path than the vanity they had indulged in.

Right on the heels of Jesus' lesson, John spoke up about an recent incident, "Teacher, ...we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." Did you catch what made the disciples want to intervene? Why they quickly stepped in and restricted that man from performing miracles in Jesus' name? John said it himself, that man was not one of them. He didn't follow Jesus and travel from place to place. He wasn't in the group. He didn't have the same status, right? It appears that John was searching for some kind of validation for their actions, thinking, "Jesus has our back here!"

There was an element of pride present. Apparently the disciples had not let go of their argument yet, about who was the greatest. Except this time it wasn't as individuals, now their arrogance

showed as a group. But imagine being Jesus' exclusive followers! The privileges, the prestige, the power. No doubt they had impressed their leader by protecting their position as God's workmen and gospel proclaimers.

Jesus responds, "Do not stop him. For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me." Jesus doesn't commend his disciples. He tells them not to keep the other man from carrying out his work. He doesn't seem to be concerned. Why was that the case? Well the reason he mentioned was that no one could defame his name after performing such a great act by using his name. Anyone who was watching the great acts would see that there was power there and that power came from Christ. What the man was doing must not have stood in the way of the kingdom of God, yet the disciples had set out to put a stop to it.

Do we ever find ourselves acting like those disciples? Trying to discourage or devalue a service that is provided by someone who is not within our group? Do we jump up to ask "What authority do you have?" instead of taking a step back to evaluate our attitude and our emotions. We often have that same internal desire to be superior, to belong to the true Christian community and quickly shut the door on outsiders. Maybe this takes shape when we talk to a close friend and harsh words come out about our neighbor that we've had a tough time getting to know. These biting statements flow naturally from a heart that thought first of itself before considering others. Thankfully, those errors in judgment did not arise in the one who came to save sinners. Jesus considered the needs of others. The Bible tells us that Jesus did not consider his equality with God as something to be used to his advantage, instead he humbled himself as a servant, a servant who would humble himself to the point of dying on a cross! There on the cross all our sins of selfish pride were paid for by Christ's own blood. A payment so powerful and complete that God no longer sees a heart darkened by sinful boasting, but now he looks through the lens of Jesus' work and his perfection and sees a heart unmarred, one made whole by Christ's humble obedience and sacrifice.

Looking back at our text, it's clear that in this instance the disciples had misread the situation. Jesus didn't want them to obstruct the man. Jesus remarked, "Whoever is not against us is for us." If he had been doing something contrary to the Word, Jesus would've spoken up and drawn attention to the matter. Jesus wasn't afraid to rebuke those in the wrong! Whether it was the Pharisees, those teachers of the law, or even Peter, his own disciple, after Peter suggested that Jesus didn't have to be killed. Jesus is not afraid to speak up. We don't see that, however, recorded for us here. The man driving out demons ended up influencing those around him in such a way that gave glory to God in a public way. Praise God that there continue to be plenty of opportunities to do just that! Whenever an athlete who's won some title or who's been picked to do a post-game interview takes time to thank God for the victory and the abilities it puts a smile on my face. I don't know what that person's faith is like, what church he or she belongs to, or even the sincerity behind the comments, but I do know that the God's name was presented in a good light and that God was given credit as the driving force behind any success the athlete had. Hearing confessions like those make me feel like there is support, that we as Christians don't stand alone, but with one another still having ample opportunities to proclaim the gospel.

So who is "for us" as Jesus said? Have you thought to yourself it's much easier to figure out who's against us? That it's easier to assume that people are more inclined to get in our way than to help out our cause? The disciples opted to follow that line of thinking and what happened? They stopped a man from performing miracles! Jesus said, "Don't hinder him." Still a difficult question, trying to decide who exactly is "for us". Sometimes it is obvious. Anyone who serves the cause of the gospel definitely makes the cut. Anyone who speaks highly of God in accordance with what we hear in Scripture checks out.

Now the conversation opens up more and Jesus continues to teach, "Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward." From the significant act of a miracle to the simple gift of a cup of water, we see two completely different actions commended by God. That cup of water, a small act in the eyes of the world, was an act of kindness that represents God well and gives him glory, so much so that Jesus said that person would not lose their reward.

So what about you? Do your contributions seem insignificant? By taking a step back would you ultimately deem your actions unimportant, irrelevant? Don't let your heart fear because even your small acts of service showcase your Savior and the faith that has been given to you. It doesn't take miracles. It doesn't take an audience of hundreds or even require the attention of even one person since God sees and smiles upon the right thing being done in faith. Just by living out your Christian life and serving others you lay down a pathway for the gospel. Feel good about that!

So what about those times when you fall short? When you fail to provide someone's physical or emotional need or miss a chance to share your faith and offer encouragement from the Word? You still have peace because God stepped in and offered his Son to pay the price. His perfect service, his perfect sacrifice enables you to take part in the work of God despite our mistakes and sinful mindsets. So take that forgiveness which you have freely received and pass it on gladly. Share the refreshing message of the gospel, that message of sins forgiven, which could be seen as a cool cup of water in another's hands.

As Christians, we carry something valuable with us everywhere we go. It doesn't matter where you live or what you do for a living, you carry something valuable. And this isn't the kind of valuable that needs to be hidden or be kept under cover. We're talking about the faith, the knowledge, the trust, the good news about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection - all the things which equip us for works of service. What a privilege it is to be able to help neighbors clear off their driveway or truly listen with open ears and open arms to a friend who struggles with recurring depression! What an incredible mission we have as followers of Christ! Because others need to hear the gospel make it your goal to avoid placing any obstacles in the way. Make it your goal to look for times to share the peace you have received, to effectively clear the snow away leading up the church doors. But don't be overwhelmed by that kind of pressure! Whether big or small, anything done for the sake of the kingdom of God, with a heart that is happy from God's great grace, is commended by our Savior. Let nothing hinder the gospel! Make it evident in your home, your work, and your community because others need to hear. Don't let your heart fear. Put your trust in God and take up confidence that God will work through his Word just as he said he would. Amen.

