



Choosing A Faith-Based Prayer
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50
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When we think of bouncers, our best stereotypical images come from movies and television shows: six-foot-tall bodybuilders with thick arms, steel-toed boots, and menacing expressions on their faces, grimly guarding the entrances of bars or nightclubs.

Whether or not the physical description fits, a bouncer's job is to provide security, keep order, refuse entry to people who aren't allowed inside, and "bounce" (throw out) those who abuse their welcome. In a way, a bouncer's job is to serve as a gatekeeper. A bouncer's call to action is determined by specific questions: Who is allowed in and who is best kept out? Who is behaving according to the accepted code of conduct, and who is best escorted out for the safety and enjoyment of those who "belong"?

The gospel this week offers us a story of zealous, would-be "bouncers." The disciples notice "someone" casting demons out in Jesus's name, and they respond by donning their bouncer armbands and barring the doors: "Teacher, we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

Unsurprisingly, Jesus sees no reason for concern: "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." Jesus chooses grace over the concern about doing things the "right" way.

Are the disciples complaining because they have no control over what the man is doing? Are they worried he might have the wrong ideas about religion? Jesus' mission is to bring near the kingdom of God here and now. Whichever way this message gets shared, whatever gets the world one step closer to looking like God's kingdom is a-okay with Jesus.

For some reasons, we elevate ourselves to the position of spiritual gatekeepers. But nowhere in the Bible do we read that a disciple's job description includes deciding who is allowed in and who needs to be kept out.

God can be imagined spending a lot of time running around and throwing open the doors we think we are entitled to close. How ironic that we feel more zealous about the borders of God's kingdom than God does! We so quickly assume that God needs our protection and defense. But we can lower our guard: God is very much capable of taking care of Godself.

What is it that allows us to think of ourselves as God's bouncers? Is it a sense of spiritual accomplishment that empowers us to determine who is in and who needs to stay out? Why are we Christians so much better at noticing and judging differences than we are at seeing and celebrating commonalities?

The stories about the evacuation of American citizens and allies from Afghanistan have been heart wrenching. At first, feelings of despair and helplessness were very palpable both in those who saw their hope for an evacuation shattered by the minute and in those around the world witnessing to that unfolding crisis. But then, signs of hope started to emerge. News channels started reporting about all kinds of people scrambling to arrange private flights to evacuate Afghan allies. Universities, faith-based groups, advocacy groups, veterans of the war in Afghanistan, just to name a few, were working together to try to arrange non-military flights out of Afghanistan. Their work was remarkable and courageous.

It was incredible to witness that the people cooperating in this effort likely wouldn't have agreed on much outside of this work they shared. Typically, they'd be divided by partisan politics. Many would never be found in the same church (or any church) on a Sunday morning. But they were willing to unite for the sake of this vital mission.

We tend to undervalue what we have in common while paying too much attention on what divides us. But why are we so quick to think that differences are undesirable? Is it perhaps that we take our perspective, our experience, our knowledge and way of life as the standard norm against which to measure anything and anyone? Is it possible that help might come from less known sources outside the circle of established leaders? Is it also possible that the answer to our prayers might come from unexpected places and in less conventional ways?

It's interesting that the disciples are not hateful people; they're well-intentioned people who want to do good and honor and protect the sacred. But well-intentioned and honorable people are also sinners who at times are motivated by their own desire for self-affirmation, advantage, and control.

Is there, perhaps, some jealousy motivating the disciples' request to rein in the unknown exorcist simply because a few moments earlier they have not been able to cast a demon out of a child (see Mark 9:17-18.28)? It is also clear that they see

themselves in a position of authority and privilege as they are closely associated with Jesus. In fact, they seem upset when they remark that the unknown exorcist “is not following *us*.” (v. 38)

Is it their intention to “bring back one who has wandered from the truth” as James indicates in his letter (James 5:19)? And what is behind what is supposed to be a charitable act?

If what is behind our truth telling is, in fact, a tearing down of another person in the attempt of justifying ourselves or building our reputation, then we need to look closely to our motivation. Often, gossip goes in that direction: it becomes a camaraderie in bad-mouthing with a pinch of self-righteousness.

Jesus is not happy with those who engage in tearing down another’s reputation. In today’s gospel, Jesus assures a reward to anyone whose action, as bold as opposing diabolical forces or as modest as offering a glass of cold water, genuinely conforms to Jesus’ character.

But he also makes use of shocking metaphors to catch our attention and to warn us not to create roadblocks for those who labor in God’s Vineyard but are not of our circle. The disciples are focused on the miracle worker who is not “following us” and see that person as the problem. Jesus redirects their attention to look inwardly: they need to chop off the parts of themselves that are problematic.

Hands and feet and eyes don’t cause any damage per se but can be instigated into doing evil deeds by our internal motivations. That’s why in the past Jesus has illustrated that there is nothing that enters a person from the outside that is impure but what come out of our heart needs checking and correcting: “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:1-21)

Admittedly, some of the language Jesus uses sounds harsh and unforgiving. But Jesus does not mean to condemn us. Rather, he intends to shake us to the honest truth of our reality. He wants us to confess what we human beings do. We exclude. We judge. We condemn. We compare. Too often, we designate ourselves God’s bouncers.

So, there is personal work that needs to happen. Jesus warns us that the last thing we may want for ourselves is to lose “saltiness” (Mark 9:50), which I interpret to be any loss of meaning and purpose in life, any loss of connection with the divine that causes me to lose faith and feel apathetic towards life.

Healing needs to happen on a personal level first. Once we learn to accept and forgive ourselves, then we will know how to forgive others. Often, we are so harsh with ourselves that we show no patience or compassion to ourselves. We may not notice what we are doing to ourselves, but it surely comes out very visibly in the impatience and harshness we use towards others.

Healing happens when we pluck out the eye by the log stuck in it, or when we stop ourselves from going where we better not go, or when we hold our hand from reaching where it shouldn't. This is when healing starts, and this, in turn, translates into healing for our neighbor.

That's when we see faith-based prayer in action, swinging wide salvation doors. James declares: "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven." Healing is always more than just finding a cure to our physical and mental ailments. Healing has to do with resurrection life. It has to do with compassion and understanding. It produces confession and forgiveness of sin.

The "prayer of faith" is an action word that creates an openness of heart and an unlocking of the mind. It creates a passionate movement from one person to another, welcoming and embracing, not satisfied with the present conditions of physical misery and emotional exclusion but desiring the blessing of God's healing for all.

For those who hold fast to an active faith, immersed in prayer and accountability, there is a path to life and freedom from sin. Confession and forgiveness generated through prayer will lead us there.

May the Lord bless us with a faith-based prayer, that we may learn how to open our hearts and welcome one another into the joy of the Father. Amen.