

The Disney Club 33, the Beefsteak Club, the Giga Society, the Woodcock Club, the Trilateral Commission, the Bohemian Club and the Seven Society. If you haven't heard of some of these, or any of these for that matter, most likely that is because the members that belong to these groups are among the most elite in the world. And the reason I'm mentioning them this morning is because of what the disciple John says in our Gospel from Mark: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we told him to stop, *because he was not one of us.*" *The Message* Bible puts it this way: "We stopped him because *he wasn't in our group.*"

It seems from John's comment, that the disciples clearly had already developed an "us versus them" mentality. That was also clear when Jesus set a child in their midst in last week's text and urged them to welcome little ones and all people as if they are welcoming him. But like the disciples, perhaps we're no different. When you're a member of an exclusive club, whether somebody is "one of us" or not is terribly important. That's certainly the case for the contemporary ultra-elite clubs I just mentioned.

And whether those exclusive clubs are known for brilliance, benevolence, big bucks, or bad behavior, they all have one thing in common -- *elitism*. They make sure it's almost impossible to be a part of them. They draw a privileged line in the sand -- on one side are the Ins, and on the other side the Outs.

Now you would think that given the missional values of Jesus, it's ironic that his disciples were cranky enough about the Ins and Outs to warrant comparison with elite clubs. John wanted to make sure that **non**-disciples weren't casting out demons, when most people would probably think that getting rid of a demon is a good thing. But apparently not John. He'd rather have that demon stay put, than have a nonunion exorcist cast it out.

Think of the contemporary parallels. Firefighters upset that someone else rescued the child from a burning house. Yelling at your kid cleaning the kitchen when that's something you normally do. The LAPD or NYPD griping about the FBI manhandling their case -- or vice versa. The CIA griping about the FBI. Okay, that probably happens all the time.

What's even more comical, or disturbing, is that this incident comes on the heel of the "Who is the greatest?" argument the group had just been having. They didn't get it then, and it is clear that in today's story, they *still* don't get it. John's confusion could have been well-intended.

He had already seen and done things with Jesus that nobody had ever seen happen. It could've been easy to understand the God-given power behind miracles as something reserved for Jesus the Christ, and those anointed for a future messianic mission. But Jesus takes a decidedly inclusive and unthreatened response to elitism in our story today. He realizes that the work of God isn't a private or privileged affair -- after all, he chose teenagers, fishermen, and tax collectors as his Twelve in the first place, and when the fields are ready for harvest, as Jesus would say, it's all hands on deck.

So what can we learn from Jesus' response to his disciple John? Surely there aren't any parallels in our churches today, right? Is the church the most elite club in the world? What if people genuinely want to connect with God, and be used by God in a meaningful way, but we are somehow accidentally standing in the way? What if our clubiness is an obstruction? What if Our "select mentality" gets in the way of growth?

Perhaps we could start by questioning our assumptions and practices to ensure they are founded on solid theology and not accidental exclusivism. - Who serves communion and why?- Who can take communion and why?- What is our basis for defining church membership since it isn't explicitly biblical? - Are there

any subtle and unintended divisions in our church based on age, gender or race? - Do people view certain styles of worship or prayer as the proper channels of connection with God?

And although there are many very good theological and philosophical answers to questions like these, perhaps these practices -- or others you can think of -- are creating accidental elitism that prevents *as many as reasonably possible* from growing in their faith, or from serving. One Anglican church recently felt this tension. It was well attended by a working poor and homeless population from the neighborhood, but became increasingly popular with local seminary students who were eager and able to serve in the church. Leadership had to think intentionally about not alienating the blue-collar and no-collar set in their church by giving too many service and leadership roles to seminarians. They didn't want to send the accidental message that you needed an "A" in Christian Theology in order to be used by God.

Or consider as well, the potential missional implications of Jesus' response. You've probably heard the phrase "belonging before believing." This describes people journeying into Christianity through first experiencing community, or participating in church small groups, and then coming to conversion after that. Parallel to that concept, could we see "serving before believing"?

We don't get details about the "someone" of verse 38, but John said that he was not *ekolouthei* -- literally meaning "not following us" or "not a disciple." Somehow someone not yet known as a follower of Christ had gotten wind that demons could be cast out in the name of Christ. We don't know anything else about the story of that "someone," but isn't it possible that serving God -- even with a potentially impure motive (and we don't know that such was the case here) -- caused him to believe in the power of Christ as the Messiah?

True story about a "serving before believing" approach to ministry: For the two years, a local church in Colorado committed to decreasing its Christmas gift spending in order to give generously during Advent toward clean water well drilling in Africa. They intentionally gave money to Charity Water, a nonreligious nonprofit founded by believers, that also very well respected in the entertainment industry. That angle has allowed church members to invite their coworkers, or nonbelieving friends, to partner with them in giving, or to ask them to donate to Charity Water at Christmas instead of buying them a gift.

While the church and its' members had been giving based on gospel values of mercy and care for the marginalized, their friends gave alongside them for their own humanitarian reasons. The church viewed this as an avenue to demonstrate Christian values in a nonthreatening way, while also building relationships with those outside the faith. They call it *creating common ground through common good*.

Jesus was concerned with something so much larger than an individual's demon being cast out by someone who appeared outside his circle. He wanted to ensure that his future church would never feel like a country club. Instead of being exclusive, he wanted her to be as inclusive as possible. And when we truly offer our community a loving and inclusive place for people to be welcomed and loved, it is then that we truly "bear the name of Christ," and neither church insider nor outsider will need to feel that he is "not one of us." Thanks be to God. Amen.