

In today's Gospel we hear about John a disciple who came to Jesus complaining about someone casting out demons in Jesus' name. John came and said: Lord there is this dude, he's doing great things, I mean he's casting out demons in your name, he's healing people, but we tried to stop him.

Wow, sometimes you have to wonder about Jesus' disciples. There is someone doing good, but we try to stop them. (pause) I can see Jesus taking a deep breath and then calmly asking John: "Now John why did you try to stop this guy who's doing good **in my name**?" And John's answer is actually not that surprising. "Well, he's not with us!"

Can we see ourselves in John? (pause) You know one could think that John had a problem with this stranger doing good. But see that was not the problem. The problem was that John and other disciples weren't able to see Jesus and his purpose in this situation. But instead they thought to themselves, we are the chosen ones. It's about us.

This is our normal human nature. It is that self-centeredness even in the midst of doing good that gets us in trouble. All of us have done this, helped someone and then felt really good about ourselves, and maybe even shared our good deed with people around us, just so that they know. Or on the other hand we saw someone else trying to do similar act of love or a good deed and we thought to ourselves, oh we've done it better. We were able to help more. Or even... there is no need for that, we've already done that.

And so John comes to Jesus and basically says: "You go and tell this guy that he's not allowed to do good, for he is not with us. He's not one of us." And Jesus looks at John and instead of talking to the stranger casting our demons in his name he addresses his disciples saying: "Do not stop him; he's fine; for no one who does a deed of power **in my name** will be able soon afterward to speak evil **of me**."

Jesus brings disciples' focus back. And the most amazing thing is that he doesn't talk about the good deed itself, but he emphasizes the fact that **it is all about him**. In other words Jesus says: "Ok boys listen to me, this is not about you, but this is about power and will of God that was revealed in me. For your deeds alone are not going to make any difference. But your deeds in my name will have the power of God himself."

Jesus says: "Whatever you do should be at all times done in my name and for my glory, for now you belong to me. You didn't choose me but I chose you." Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life and no one comes to my Father except through me."

Ok now when we hear Jesus saying it's all about me and not you, that sounds like we have a pretty self-centered God. But that's not true; actually the exact opposite is true. We have the most giving, loving and forgiving God. For in Christ God chose to reconcile this world with

him. In Christ we're given a new life, forgiveness and hope. In Christ we can find comfort and peace. And it is in Christ that we can help our neighbor.

And so we can see why it is important for us to stay in touch with Jesus. For if we lose touch with Christ, our lives will start to be about **ourselves**, **our** good deeds, **our** time and treasure, **our** suffering or loneliness. And yes when life is only about us, all the sudden it starts to be pretty lonely.

But God does not want that for us. That's why send his Son. So that whoever believes in him shall not be separated from his love, here on earth or in heaven. We belong to Christ. We've been made through Christ. We've been saved by Christ, and we're called to live in Christ. That's the blessing of Christian community centered in Christ.

And that's what this whole conversation between Jesus and his disciples was about. It's about belonging to Jesus. And Jesus says: "Whoever is not against us is for us." And then he adds: "Truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because **you bear my name**, will by no means lose the reward."

What do these words mean? They mean that Christ does take care of his sheep. He will never abandon you. And not only that, he'll reward those who'll help and take care of you.

But sometimes our attention has to be redirected, we have to refocus, we have to bring our attention from ourselves, or whatever else it is that distracts us back to Christ. We're literally called to give up our lives for Christ so that in Christ we can be given a new, more meaningful and everlasting life. But to give our lives to Christ is not always easy. The stumbling blocks are everywhere and they can be all kinds of things.

But Jesus says: "If you hand or foot causes you to stumble cut it off, if it is you eye tear it out." Now of course these are the passages that cannot be taken literally. Jesus does not want us to be cutting off our limbs. What he talks about is the seriousness of the situation. How much Christ cares for us and how much he wants us to stay connected to him, to walk with him, and to approach each other through him.

Jesus says: "Whatever comes between you and I cut it off, refocus, stay with me. For there isn't a better or safer place for you to be." At the end of our Gospel reading Jesus says: "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?" Jesus is the only source of saltiness, and we are the salt of the earth.

But the fact is that there are many stumbling blocks in our lives and all of us fall, some more often than others. And that's ok. But when we fall, we know that we're not alone, that Christ is here to lift us up, to give us his promised peace. And when we see others fall, we remember that it is our hands that Christ uses to help one another and to carry each other.

I'd like to close this sermon with one of my favorite pictures used by Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. To describe a good Christ centered relationships or a Christ centered community, he used a picture of a wagon wheel. We can all picture a wagon wheel, it has circular frame with spokes that connect in the center...

If we approach each other through Christ, he will abide in us and we will abide in him, we'll be all united in him. And his love, forgiveness and peace will be real and visible in our lives and relationships.

Amen