

The Super In-Group
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Scriptures:

Mark 9:38-50 Revised Standard Version (RSV)

³⁸ John said to him, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For he that is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward. ⁴² "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. ⁴⁹ For every one will be salted with fire⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

Sermon:

The world seems to be divided into in-groups and out-groups, people like us and people not like us, our tribe and their tribe, etc. In one way or another, we all find ourselves within some in-group or out-group, don't we?

A person's first and primary in-group is their family - blood relatives. As I grew up, like most people, I became a member of a variety of other in-groups, such as my class in school, my little league baseball team, high school football team, and as a Christian, a member of my church in-group. As a young adult, after joining one of the biggest in-groups - the United States Air Force - my family, my youthful in-groups, and where I came from were not as important as they once were. What located me in my larger in-group was my rank, my Air Force Specialty Code, my unit of assignment and its mission.

Within each of my in-groups, there were expectations of me depending upon my position within the group along with demands of loyalty and support of the other members and the overall purpose of my in-group. I tell you all this to context our scriptures today as the disciples, an in-group, sorts out who's in and who's out of their Jesus group. Also, hear Mark's Jesus group doing the same thing behind the scenes of the text 35-40 years after the resurrection event.

Last Sunday we looked at the criteria for a person's status within the Jesus group and who will be the greatest. The greatest members in the Jesus group will be those who equitably serve, protect, accept, and care for all within the Jesus group with no thought for their own social status.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, in-groups and out-groups shaped the nature of society and social interchanges just as they do today. Some in-group and out-group boundaries, like ours in the Western World, were fluid, but some were not, for instance the family and its

boundaries. One may become a dear and honor friend with all that entails in loyalty and reciprocal benefits and responsibilities, but one can never really become family - blood is blood as they say.

With the family being the source of one's identity and worth, to lose this vital relationship was one of the worse things that could happen to a person. Many of Jesus' disciples and followers like himself had walked away from their family-village self-identities and the support of kith and kin in response to Jesus' understanding of the coming kingdom. This understanding challenged much of the religious-political-family status quo. In response to this loss of family identity and support, Jesus formed a fictive or surrogate family. A family that would be divinely ratified in his blood on Calvary.

John, one of the disciples, comes to Jesus and informs him that there has been someone, not of their Jesus in-group, who has been casting out demons; that is making people whole in the name of Jesus. As I have said, a person's name and where they were from in the ancient world carried not only their total social and cultural pedigree, but any authority they may have had. In the case of Jesus, his name as a broker of God's will, held authority over the demonic as we see elsewhere in Mark's Gospel.

Please note the disciple's assumptions: this someone, although a fellow Jew, "was not following us." It appears from reading the rest of the passage, the disciples meant that this fellow was not one of them - the in-group of twelve. Jesus is not included in the group per se. He is not a part of the "us" as it were in this conversation. This was because he was the founder-patron of the group and stood outside it but up against it.

So, this unknown exorcist, sort of a healer for hire that were common in the ANE, could have just been curious and wanted to test the validity of the authority of Jesus' name. I mention that Jesus differed from many such exorcists qua magicians in many ways but primarily in the scope of his unique mission and his authority. Also, he did not charge fees or take any remuneration in return for his healings and exorcisms. All that aside, our unknown exorcist was not a member of the "inner, in-group "; he was just an outsider doing "good" in Jesus' name. "There is just something about that name," isn't there?

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is clear when he says that no one can use his name; that is, evoke the authority of his name, see the results, and later come to speak ill or dishonor him. And we must remember that there were a lot of folks trying to discredit Jesus and his work, but this guy, this unknown exorcist, would not be among them because he knew the power of Jesus' name.

In fact, in the context of Jesus' Jewish world of in-groups and out-groups,⁴⁰ "Whoever is not against us is for us." Or, at least they were open to persuasion and belief. Therefore, it seems that our unknown exorcist may have become a believer in the power and authority of Jesus' name, but not necessarily a member of Jesus' followers. We don't know what happens to him.

What we do know is Jesus tells his disciples that no work done in his name is insignificant. In short, any act of human kindness done in Jesus' name, even the simple act of giving a cup of water, regardless of who that person is or their group affiliation is noteworthy before God. Therefore, don't discount other folk's acts of kindness; don't try to stop their healing or their work for peace and justice - God's work - just because they are not a part of your Jesus in-group.

Furthermore, right on the heels of this statement, Jesus issued a warning to the disciples as his in-group-surrogate family and concomitantly to Mark's church and Christians across the ages. In effect, Jesus says that being "in" does not always make one "right". Please note the

use of the word "you," meaning the disciples, and I guess all others, who see themselves as part of the in-group. Jesus says:

⁴² 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me [*if you teach and foster foolish in-group thinking that is not directly from me, especially things that exclude, dissuade, dishonor, or deny fellowship to the young in the faith or those of the faith who by conventional social standards are deemed not worthy*], it would be better for you [*so-called in-groupers*] if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. [*I mention drowning by millstone was a form of capital punishment of the day. Thus, to mislead or exclude a little one, the socially marginalized, or young in the faith, is a capital offense in Jesus' eyes.*] So, be careful what you teach or preach, whom you include, and whom you reject.

Jesus goes on to elaborate: ⁴³If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life [*in the Kingdom of God*] maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. (*Hands are associated with the sins of theft or covetousness and would scandalize a person to be distrusted. Sort of like a pastor convicted of theft preaching on the eighth commandment, "Thou Shall Not Steal".*)⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. (*Reference to feet and eyes in Jewish thought may euphemistically refer to the male genitalia or transgressions of sexual boundaries by the eyes.*) In short, don't take advantage of the little ones, those new to the faith and family of Jesus or capitalize on their gratitude at belonging and being cared for lest you reap the promise and pain of hell.

Jesus' exaggerated references to acts of self-mutilations would have gotten people's attention and reinforced the high moral expectations of his followers. Furthermore, Jesus' meanings would have been very clear. If a person had any personal, social, cultural, or religious hang-ups that would scandalize, dishonor, exclude, or dissuade those who had come or want to come to Christ, especially those often seen as socially inferior or at a different place in their faith journey, they had better get rid of such things before they harm the young and most vulnerable in Christ. Not to rid one's self of such things or amend one's perspectives is to run the risk of some hellish consequences.

Jesus goes on to say that all his followers will have their loyalty and resolve salted, seasoned if you will, in the fires of temptation and the ordeals of their faith. Therefore, a person must not compromise their loyalty to God and one another or their resolve of faith; that is, lose their saltiness in the heat of testing by buying into beliefs, doctrines, and dogmas of lesser understandings, especially those that may scandalize, shame, exclude, or dishonor the little ones.

If a person gives in and takes the pathways of social or cultural accommodation, there may come a time when those ways of relating to others become so fixed and a part of the believer's mindset that they assume they are right and normal. So, forewarned means a person had better know the ways of Christ first and foremost, and then test all other doctrines concerning who is in and who is out by them, not the conventional social, cultural, or religious standards of others.

To this point, I hasten to point out that Jesus actively sought out the marginal, the so-called socially inferior within the greater in-group of Israelites, because many of the socially prominent were thoroughly convinced that they were so right in their assessments and judgments of others, nothing more was needed. In their believing that they were right, they

had marginalized and disavowed many among God's people to the point that they believed that such people were even insignificant to God. Jesus called and healed these so-called insignificant folks and shared with them the good news.

In the coming kingdom, the lowly and marginalized would have their prosperity in life and their standing before others reversed or restored by God. The marginal and the lowly in Christ, who remained faithful until the end would receive greater honor than all those who thought themselves members of Israel's preferred in-group.

Have you ever thought that at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ lies God's effort to break down or at least make more fluid the boundaries between human in-groups, so that one day all of humanity might become God's Super In-Group for the greater good of all life on this planet and maybe beyond? Just wondering if you have ever thought of it that way.

However, in all fairness we must understand that by Jesus' own words he was sent only to a segment of his own in-group, the lost sheep of Israel. Many Jews misunderstood him, rejected him and his message. The Jerusalem Jewish elite orchestrated his death, and, yet, the power of his message would not die, and the authority of his name lives on - just something about that name.

Eventually, under the influence of God's Holy Spirit, the Gospel moved out of its ancient, geographical and exclusive roots to become the Good News of God for all people for all time. So much for the disciple's "us" in-group thinking. But, sadly, God's universal plan and hope appears to have collapsed back in on itself to become the sectarianism, in-group-ism we know and seem to love as Christianity today.

God's hope in Christ, I believe, was for the Kingdom of God to come on earth through the efforts of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of all people, especially such outsiders like you and me. I am talking about benefactors of God's grace like us, who work to usher in a time when all human affairs will be governed by the Law of Love - love the neighbor as the self, only then the neighbor is not just a member of some little ethnic in-group, but all humankind, but most especially those who claim the name of Christ and need that cup of water.

So, you and I are definitely not members of a Jewish in-group of disciples, are we? As the Apostle Paul will tell us, we are "in Christ and he in Us". We are members of God's holy family in Christ, so let us in the Spirit strive to see our in-group in Christ as eventually embracing all peoples. Who knows, maybe one day even others from among the stars. Talk about a Super In-group.

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