

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

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Rio Rancho, NM

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STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Luke 9: 46-50

Have you ever thought of the church as a fellowship of strange bedfellows? Folks with whom you would normally not rub shoulders. Folks very unlike yourself in so many ways. O the strange bedfellows I have encountered in a lifetime of church membership! Same for you? I suspect so.

Well, the disciple John resisted that idea strenuously. You remember John, a member of Jesus' inner circle, along with Peter and James. Jealous for his master's reputation, John did not want anyone trafficking in Jesus' good name. And so he was appalled that a strange exorcist was using the name of Jesus to cast out demons. All without permission!

Hear John's complaint: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." To John, such an

unauthorized use of Jesus' name was infringing upon their franchise rights. That had to be stopped in its tracks. No way that an outsider should capitalize on the miraculous power of Jesus!

Let us admit that we know that attitude, don't we? It is the most natural feeling in all the world. We find ourselves circling the wagons around "our Jesus", the one we subscribe to. We become reputation protectors of the One we serve. We do not want his good name rubbed in the dirt by strange exorcists or anybody else. Didn't Jesus himself once say, "Those who are not with us are against us"? (Luke 11: 23)

Maybe this is what John was thinking: "You've got to keep it in the family. Put it out in the public domain and it gets twisted. You know how people always distort the truth. Your brand name could be ruined. If you are not with us, surely you are against us."

So John is one of us. We understand John. I understand John. I am often appalled at what people do and say in the

name of Jesus. They seem to be peddling a Jesus I don't recognize. How dare they besmirch the Lord's reputation! Isn't that "taking the Lord's name in vain"? I feel John's protest rising up in my heart. Sometimes I just want to issue a "cease and desist order." Wait! Am I starting to sound like John?

But Jesus will not let John set the agenda for the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is far more gracious, far more generous than John could imagine. Jesus corrects his well-intended follower with these words: "Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is for us." Mark's version says this: "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." So Jesus displays an amazing openness to a strange exorcist who worked without prior authorization. Jesus implies that this outsider could well be a fellow traveler in the Kingdom of God. So he endorses anyone who does good on behalf of the Kingdom of God. With or without permission.

Consider Jesus' openness: "For those who are not against us are for us." What a generous spirit. Jesus seems to issue a broad invitation to anyone on the outside looking in. He leaves the door wide open for all kinds of strange exorcists, odd ducks, camp followers and strange bedfellows. This is the Good Shepherd who said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold: I must bring them also" (John 10: 16). This is the Beloved Master who said of the children: "Do not hinder them for to such belong the Kingdom of God."

This is the Teacher who told a parable about inviting the "poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" to a banquet. This is the Reconciler who called a tax collector and a Zealot to follow him, Matthew and Simon, strange bedfellows in the company of Jesus. Polar opposites, sworn enemies, one a collaborator with Rome, the other a deadly opponent of Rome. Both invited to accompany Jesus. And we think we have political differences in the church!

The Gospels often remembered Jesus' words and deeds, because they addressed issues in the early church. One issue was the outsider, the odd duck, the strange exorcist. Take for instance, Saul of Tarsus. That Saul who was breathing fire upon the early Christians, standing by as Stephen was stoned, sent to imprison believers in Damascus.

But after seeing the Risen Christ, Acts 9 tells us that Saul, now called Paul, comes to Jerusalem. To say that there were doubts about his sincerity would be an understatement of Biblical proportions! The text says quite simply, "The disciples were afraid of him, for they did not believe he was a disciple." An outsider, a source of terror, a sworn enemy of the Gospel. The "John factor" was hard at work. How can you trust someone with such a checkered past?

Until Barnabas showed up. This trusted follower of Jesus vouched for Paul's authentic vision of the Risen Christ. He vouched for his courageous witness to the Gospel in Damascus. Barnabas reverses the "John factor", the distrust

of the outsider. Barnabas speaks for Jesus who once said, “Those who are not against us are for us.” So Barnabas welcomes the ministry of this fierce opponent turned passionate friend of the Gospel. The doors of the church are always open to anyone and everyone, regardless of their background, regardless of the skeletons in their closet.

And isn't that precisely the heart of the Good News, that God takes on human flesh and dwells among us, even us. Doesn't Jesus seem careless about the kind of people he befriends, utterly blind to their obvious faults? Even seems attracted to the scandal ridden and the flagrant sinners. Jesus throws his arms around all kinds of people, especially the misfits and the losers.

Think how he has welcomed all of us. We who are strange beyond belief, twisted in a thousand different ways. Even we are embraced and held and accepted and loved. The outlaws and the angry, the dissidents and the indifferent, the self-righteous and the self-absorbed. Gracious heavens, Jesus does not seem to care what we

have done or our dark shadows or the trail of tears we have left behind us. It just doesn't matter to this utterly gracious Savior who knows your past and loves you anyway.

Are we not all strange bedfellows gathered here for worship today? Let's divulge the church's best kept secret. None of us deserve to be here in the presence of God. And yet, here we are. By the sheer grace of God. If word got out on the street just how gracious Jesus really is, would we have room for all the strange bedfellows who would show up here? I really mean that. Imagine if we changed our advertising to read: "Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church, a place where no one belongs. A place where everyone belongs."

My oldest son Aaron, his wife Shelby and their two children live in Kerrville, Texas, recently hit by deadly flooding. In this ruby red part of Texas, one of the first groups to arrive on the scene to help was a search and rescue team from Mexico City called "Los Topos", which means "the moles". They got that nickname from their heroic work after

the 1985 Mexico City earthquake rescuing people from the rubble. “Los Topos” arrived in Kerrville a full week before FEMA got there. Though at first the locals were suspicious of these “foreigners”, these “outsiders”, their tireless energy endeared them to the entire Kerrville community. Shoulder to shoulder American citizens and Mexican nationals worked to help find the victims. Funny how a disaster makes for strange bedfellows,

So as you come forward this morning to receive God’s love and mercy at this Table, look at who is standing beside you. A sinner much like yourself, saved by grace alone. A strange bedfellow like yourself, welcomed by the same Lord and Savior who loved you and gave himself for you. And consider it a privilege and blessing to rub shoulders with these amazing sisters and brothers for whom Christ died. To walk with them and journey with them in the light and love of Christ our Risen Lord-what a privilege! What a joy! Thanks be to God! Amen.