

SERMONSECOND
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

Church Cliques

September 30, 2018

Mark 9:38-50

Rev. Dr. Thomas P. Groome III

Augusta National Golf Club. This club is famous for hosting the Masters PGA tournament every year at its historic, gorgeous and challenging golf course. It's also one of those places I would love for see one day. There are about 300 members at any given time, and membership is extended strictly by invitation -- there is no application process. However, the club is also infamous for its membership policies. Augusta National made history in 2012 inviting the first two women; Condeleeza Rice and Darla Moore.

There is CORE, a NYC club, whose membership dues are \$50,000 registration fee + \$15,000 per year. According to CORE website it is "where CEOs and cultural icons comfortably collide, our vibrant community is a diverse, self-selecting group that shares a common sensibility and a passion to change the world around us. CORE: members are people who have significantly altered business, culture, and society. They have all been brought together by their desire to be inspired, to explore new possibilities, and to constantly expand their world."
<http://www.thecoreclub.com>

Groucho Marx once said, "I would never join any club that would have me for a member."

In our text from Mark, John the disciple says to Jesus: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us" (v. 38 NRSV). The NIV translation reads, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we told him to stop because he was not following us." The Message Bible puts it this way: "We stopped him because he wasn't in our group."

The disciples clearly had already developed an "us versus them" mentality and 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 today's elite membership clubs. 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 are the Outs.

Given the missional values of Jesus, it's ironic that his disciples were cranky enough about the Ins and Outs to warrant comparison with these other elite clubs. John wanted to make sure that non-disciples were not casting out demons. Most people would think that getting rid of a demon is a good thing . . . but apparently not John. He would rather have that demon stay put than have a nonunion exorcist cast it out. Think of some modern day parallels here. Firefighters

upset that someone else rescued the child from a burning house. Yelling at your child cleaning the kitchen when that's something you normally do. LOL! Or better yet, Leslie and I refusing to have our 5 and 3 year old grandchildren clear off the dinner table and take the plates and glasses to the kitchen! That's without anyone asking them to do it.

What's even more comical is that this incident comes on the heels of the "Who is the greatest?" argument the group had been having. Jesus rebukes them saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." The disciples didn't get it then, and it is clear that in today's text, 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 have 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 took a decidedly inclusive and unthreatened response to elitism in this text. Jesus said, *"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. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward"*(vv. 39-41).

Jesus 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. Jesus has a larger cosmic perspective, and when, as he would say on one occasion, the fields are ready for harvest, it's all hands on deck.

So what can we learn from Jesus' response to 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 accidentally standing in the way? What if our club mentality is an obstruction? Does our "elitism" get in the way of growth?

Where possible, Jesus is calling us to be "ecumenical" inside of our churches and not just between them. 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?
- What is our basis for defining church membership?
- Why are some functions of the church reserved only for those who are ordained?
- Are there any subtle and unintended divisions in our church based on age, gender or ethnicity?
- Do people view certain styles of worship or prayer as the proper channels of connection with God?
- Are there any ways that we as clergy "professionalize" ministry?

There are many very good theological and philosophical answers to questions like these. But perhaps these practices—or others you can think of—are creating accidental elitism that prevents as many as reasonably possible from growing and serving. We need to be very careful

that people in our churches with different education, social standing, maturity, training, etc. aren't our own "little ones who believe" (v. 42).

A strong community enhances the lives of its members. A strong community ensures that people have a sense of belonging. It provides protection and support, it shapes values and provides cultural norms. That's the positive side of strong communities.

The drawback is that expectations and demands can restrict freedom and creativity.

One 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 Systematic Theology in order to be used by God.

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 following us" or "not one of us." 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 this "someone," but isn't it possible that serving God—even with potentially impure motives (and we don't know that was the case here) —caused him to believe in the power of Christ as the Messiah?

All of this is to say that the disciples actions should give each of us hope. Despite our numerous blunders and missteps, we can still become faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

The disciples erred in wanting the ministry of Jesus to remain in their hands. They were the ones who Jesus had given power and now they realize that the ministry was growing beyond them. So often the church wants to remain an exclusive "invitation only" club.

Jesus was concerned with something so much larger than just one demon being cast out. He wanted to ensure that his future church would never feel like a country club. Instead of being exclusivist, he wanted her to be as inclusive as possible.

So how do we turn our churches into the least elitest places of our culture?

Let's first think about Peter, a passionate follower of Jesus asked how far is too far in terms of forgiveness, and Jesus responds by challenging him with an infinite numerical metaphor. Jesus is essentially telling Peter that there isn't a too far.

Then let's think about inclusion. Inclusion doesn't mean we lose our identity, if anything we enhance it by interacting with other identities. We learn. We grow. We are changed and

challenged. We become something we never anticipated. We can become something better than before.

So rather than “us versus them”, it now becomes “we.” A ‘we’ enhanced by our diversity and inclusivity. The harmony of diversity can only exist if we desire it. This doesn’t mean we lose our personas or give up what we believe, it means we deny the stereotype that we will. It means we look to the expressions of others as a way to learn about ourselves.

I believe God wants the church to be and act how the world is meant to be, what it could look like. People who love God and love neighbor as we love ourselves.

When we do this, we will truly "bear the name of Christ" (v. 41), and neither church insider nor outsider will need to feel that he/she is "not one of us."

Sources:

"Augusta National Golf Club." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augusta_National_Golf_Club.

"Inside story: The Groucho Club -- 20 years of schmoozing and boozing." independent.co.uk/news/media/inside-story-the-groucho-club--20-years-of-schmoozing-and-boozing-6146962.html#.

Treby, Guy. "Portals to power." nytimes.com/2011/06/19/fashion/new-yorks-core-club-a-portal-to-power.htm

Bob Kaylor, Senior Minister, Park City UMC Park City, Utah. The Most Elite Club in the World, September 30, 2012.

<https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/exclusive-clubs/index.html>

Harper Collins Bible Commentary, James L. Mays, Editor. San Francisco, CA, 2000.

The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN 1991.

The message is from sermons that I preached over the years that I have been in the pastorate. I have compiled them from the notes I made before they were preached. I do not know where I found some of the material contained here. I may have borrowed it, as a whole or in part, from others. I simply do not remember. If this is the case, I apologize right now, and that our combined efforts will glorify God.