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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Pentecost 18

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

"We saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

We could just as easily translate the text as "we tried to stop him, because he was not one of us."

He was not of our ilk.

He belonged to another team.

So what do we have here but an "us versus him" scenario.

What we have here is a competition going on.

And competition is something with which we are all too familiar.

We see competition on Sundays if we spend any time at all watching football.

Indeed, whether we like watching football or baseball or hockey or tennis or golf, whenever we are watching sports we are observing the throes of competition.

And then there is our education system in which students compete with one another to be the head of their class, while competing as well to get into the best schools.

And then there is the competition that takes place in the workforce, where people vie for particular positions in companies.

And employers compete to attract the best employees.

And companies compete to win this or that contract.

Competition abounds in the world around us.

My wife Kathy will tell you that part of the reason, and no small part at that...

Kathy will tell you why she didn't pursue a career in music, even though she graduated college with a degree in flute performance.

Even though she is incredibly skilled at playing the flute...

The reason why she didn't go on to make a living playing her flute is because of the cut throat competition surrounding the music industry.

A musician strives and strives, competing with other musicians to get into a particular orchestra.

And once a musician lands a gig playing with a particular orchestra, that isn't good enough.

That musician then wants to sit first chair in that orchestra.

And so the musician will strive and strive, competing with the other musicians in their section.

And once the musician obtains first chair, that isn't good enough.

And that musician will strive and strive, competing with other musicians to get into a better orchestra.

And the cycle of competition is never ending.

And that just wasn't the type of life my wife was looking for.

Not to mention, God had other plans for her.

Yes, competition is something with which we are all too familiar.

Even something as simple as driving a car becomes a competition with certain people.

Some drivers have to pass everyone on the road.

Some drivers have to have the beat out other persons in a parking lot for a particular parking space.

Some drivers think they are the most important persons on the road—the heck with everyone else.

And even churches, even churches fall victim to competition.

Indeed, some pastors have no qualms about what is called sheep stealing.

Some pastors will aggressively pursue visitors from other churches to join their church, forget the fact that the visitor is member somewhere else.

Even Lutheran pastors have been known to say to visitors from nearby Lutheran churches, "If you are looking for a new church home, you are welcome here."

Some pastors will approach visitors without any qualms.

But the unspoken courtesy among pastors is that if you learn that someone is visiting from another church, you call the pastor of that church and let them know that one of their sheep is straying.

That way the other pastor can reach out to their member.

But to immediately try to steal another pastor's member is frowned upon by most pastors.

But, we see how the competition even affects churches.

And this does not even broach all the ways that churches try to bring persons into membership, so as to outdo their neighbor churches.

Comfortable theater seating, the latest in sound and visual technology.

I had even heard that one church was using aroma therapy of sorts, whereby they were pumping pleasant smells through their air conditioning system.

So, yes, even churches are competing to win and even to steal members.

And, sisters and brothers in Christ, this is what we appears to be going on in our gospel lesson today.

PAUSE

In this gospel reading, John tells Jesus that he and the other disciples saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

This man was not one of us.

This man is encroaching on our ministry.

This man is stealing those who might have been our disciples.

PAUSE

But, this would have been nothing out of the ordinary.

Wandering exorcists were common in Jesus' time.

And many of them would invoke any name, Jesus's name or some other name, in order to assist them in their work.

But the disciples don't like it and they tell Jesus about it.

Perhaps this man, this wandering exorcist, this miracle worker ruffles the feathers of the disciples all the more, because earlier in Mark's gospel the disciples had failed in their own attempt to exorcise a demon.

So whereas the disciples failed in using Jesus' name to perform an exorcism, this man here succeeds, and BOY!, does it get under the disciples' skin.

PAUSE

So is competition, any competition, the problem?

In truth, competition in itself is not bad.

Friendly competition can often prove to be a blessing.

Even the apostle Paul was not above using a little friendly competition in his own ministry.

When Paul wrote to his churches he sometimes gave them a little poke in their side, he sometimes wheedled his congregations into action by challenging congregations to outdo one another.

In particular, when Paul was working on a collection for the poor in Jerusalem, Paul would boast about one congregation's generosity to another congregation so as to encourage that congregation's generosity.

A little friendly competition can be a good thing.

PAUSE

And it behooves us to remember that when it comes to the work of revealing the presence of God's kingdom in the here and now...

When it comes to the work of revealing the presence of God's kingdom in our present day world, we are all on the same team.

It is good point to remember for the disciples in our gospel, and it is a good point for us to remember today.

We are all on the same team.

PAUSE

Oftentimes, though, we get caught up in thinking of "the church" as Our Saviour Lutheran.

And, yes, this is the church.

But our church is only one part of the much larger body of Christ.

For is not the Seventh Day Adventist Church next door part of the church?

Is not the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Penbrook part of the church?

Is not Ridgeway up the street part of the church?

All of these churches and the many others in our area and across the globe consist of members, consist of believers that are as passionate about serving Christ as we are.

Their teachings, their worship life, their way of doing things, may be a little different.

But we should still see their members as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

To be sure, Lutherans don't have the corner market on the Christian faith.

PAUSE

As an aside, when someone asks me about my personal faith, I say to them that I know that I am a Christian, but I believe that I am a Lutheran.

I know that I am a Christian, but I believe I am a Lutheran.

In other words, I know Christ died for me and I know the power of Christ's resurrection through baptism.

But, in making sense of my Christian experience, I resonate most closely with the Lutheran doctrines, even though I don't believe Lutheranism is perfect, to the exclusion of other interpretations of Christianity.

I don't know that any church, or any faith system, has the corner market on explaining the mysteries of God...for me, I just resonate with Lutheran theology, as I imagine you do.

And, Martin Luther himself described the church much more broadly than consisting of a group of people with a particular set of doctrines and beliefs.

For Luther, the church had existed since the dawn of humanity, even way back in the Old Testament.

The church had existed alongside humanity, whenever humanity has clung to the promises of God.

The Church existed with Seth, and Noah, and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so on and so forth down through the millennia.

The church for Luther was defined as the group of people of any time and place that clung to the promise of God.

In like manner, the church exists today wherever people cling to the promises of God.

And dare I say, the church then may manifest itself among people who don't even call themselves Christian by name.

To cling to the promises of God, to live simply by hope, I would dare say, is to be counted among the people of God, is to be on the same team.

And so we are not in competition with other individuals and groups in the sense that we have to prove that we alone have the truth of God and others don't.

We are not in competition in that regard.

We may be in competition with others in the sense that we strive to outdo one another in showing God's love and grace in the world, but if anything that should be a friendly competition.

PAUSE

Now, before I conclude this sermon, I do want to speak briefly about the opportunity God is putting before us to work together with another congregation.

As I noted in announcements at worship and in the newsletter, our congregation was approached by Epiphany Lutheran on Colonial Park Road.

They asked if we might talk about ways in which we might share resources, and might do some cooperative ministry together.

Since that time, their pastor has resigned, and so God's call for us to walk together has been brought all the more to the fore.

And it is not a competition.

And it is not about what we have here such that it is about what we can do to help them in their time of need.

It is not about patronage, such that we would be condescending toward them, "Oh, we need to help poor Epiphany."

No, it is about a team, it is about how we can support each other in our shared ministry to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

It is about what we can learn from one another.

It is about what we can do to bolster the work of Gospel, whether that is helping each other with things like Family Promise, egg making, and the like.

Ultimately is about Jesus.

For as Jesus said, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Whoever is not against us is for us. Whoever is not against us is for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.