

September 28, 2003
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes

Numbers 11:25-29

James 5:1-6

Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

God's spirit goes beyond the bounds of organized religion.

The disciples of Moses and of Jesus in Numbers chapter 11 and Mark chapter 9 are embarrassed and even angry at the good being done by those who aren't part of their group.

"Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!" says Moses. "Whoever is not against us is for us," says Jesus. These great agents of God articulate a freedom and a vision larger than the groups that support them. The surprise is that the Holy Spirit, although active in and through the institution, is not limited to authorized ecclesiastical channels. Yes, the spirit does act within the institution. This was supremely evident in Pope John Paul's visits to Mexico and Poland. But the Holy Spirit bursts any bonds, moves beyond any bounds that the institutional Church, church groups, and individual Christians try to describe or define.

"Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us." Jesus replied, "Do not prevent him."

In all the gospel stories, Jesus prevents and forbids very little. When he does, it's usually to restrain the disciples when they try to disrespect the woman who lavishes expensive oil on the Lord's feet in Mark 14, or when they go to call down fire on the inhospitable Samaritans in Luke 9, or when they attack the temple guards with a sword in Luke 26, or, in today's gospel, Mark chapter 9, when they want to put the clamps on someone who's not a card carrying member of the group.

It's amazing that we have become a religion that restricts and forbids and prevents so much. And we're even known for it. We make announcements at Mass listing those who, though they may be company in the Lord's house, are not welcome at his table. Our Pope writes a really fine encyclical about Holy Communion, and all that many interpreters say about it is that it's a reminder to divorced and remarried people that they're forbidden to receive, which it doesn't really say at all. Some of our most well-meaning people can be so exclusionist.

Yes, we have rules. And yes, they should be obeyed. But the Lord was known for breaking the rules and letting people off the hook. It was a rule that women caught in adultery should be stoned, but Jesus got them off with a warning. We weren't supposed to pick the grain on the Sabbath, but the guys were hungry. And the prodigal son should have been punished. But that's Jesus, always the seeker.

I meet every month with a group of ministers representing a number of denominations. Sure, we have our confessional differences, but we share so much in the Spirit. The really big things, the deep things of God's love and the purpose of the death and resurrection of Jesus, these we agree upon. And it is that faith which unites us. Years ago, I used to be very uncomfortable in such ecumenical gatherings. Not anymore. Especially today, I think we need to focus on what unites rather than on what divides.

In the *Oxford Book of Prayer*, there is a prayer carved in stone over the doorway of a London church. It reads: "Oh God, make the door of this house wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship; narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife. Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children, nor to strain feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back the tempter's power. God make the door of this house the gateway to thine eternal Kingdom."

Would that we might become what this prayer invites.

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