

Listening for the Promise

WEEKLY DEVOTIONAL

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21) – September 29, 2024

“Jesus said [to John], “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

For the one who is not against us is for us.”

–Mark 9:39–40–

Children of God

The more I read the Gospels, the more Jesus reminds me of my mother. Repeatedly, I hear him saying what I remember her saying almost daily to me and my five siblings, “Why can’t you kids just get along?!”

It was a rhetorical question. Mother didn’t want to know why we fought like cats and dogs; she wanted us to quit fighting. She knew that “playing nice” wasn’t our default setting. In that way, my family is like the family of God in miniature — strong, gifted children who love each other in principle but who don’t always get along.

Moses shepherded a tribe like that. They complained loudly and long about God’s gifts, so Moses complained to God about them. The spirit of disgruntlement was abroad in the camp. God promised to ease Moses’ burden, so the Holy Spirit came to rest on the elders chosen to share it. In response, they prophesied. But when two elders who stayed apart from the group received the same gifting, the others grew jealous.

The Son of God faced the same situation with his flock of disciples. They enjoyed the great gift of Jesus’ presence, but they were discontent with their own spiritual weakness. Unable themselves to cast out demons, they became jealous of an outsider who could. They weren’t upset that the exorcist was successful, just that he wasn’t in line behind them.

Jesus doesn’t ask why his children can’t get along. Instead, he calls them to a higher purpose. Not simply smiling at each other on Sunday mornings, but rejoicing in each other’s triumphs all week long. Peace is not merely the absence of rancor. It is the presence of patience. It is mutual confession and compassion, loyalty and faithfulness to fellow believers. Peace is guarding the Body by resisting the temptation to gossip and grumble. It is praying and praising together, as one in Christ. Where is the Gospel in that? It is where our elder brother, who might have complained against us, took the punishment for our sins. He might have been against us, but he is for us.