

September 30, 2018  
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
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I think I've told you part of this story before, but when our daughter Katie was in preschool, she had a very clever teacher. In the corner of the classroom was a life size poster of a cartoon cowboy. It was only the top half of his body so, the average four-year-old could look him right in the eye.

When one of the kids would come to the teacher with something to report, the questions were always the same. "Have you been hurt? Has anyone else been hurt? Is anything broken?" If the answers were all "no," the solution was to "tell it to the cowboy." The teacher had learned that, for the most part, the children didn't really need or want a solution. They just wanted to tell the story. And so, a paper cowboy did the trick. But things change as we get older. We usually call it by another name, but tattling can become more seductive than when we were kids.

We tell a story to make ourselves look more important or clever.

We tell a story because we want to seem like we're insiders.

Or we tell a story because we're hoping for a reward or we're hoping someone else might be punished.

Or...we tell a story because we just can't keep it to ourselves anymore!

One Friday, it seemed like every other person who came in had some kind of story to tell. Most of them were either self-promoting or whining. I told a friend that what I really needed was a cowboy like the one from Katie's preschool. And on Monday – she brought me this guy.

He's a good reminder of a lot of things, including the fact that tattling is usually not a great idea. Just look at the disciples. They came across someone who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus. Now, it isn't something anyone has ever asked me to do, but it was a key piece of Jesus' ministry at that point. It was one of the first things that he did as a part of bringing in the Kingdom of God.

The disciples had met a guy who was helping people regain their lives and escape terrible pain. He was doing these things in the name of Jesus – which should have been commendable, but John felt compelled to tattle. And as he did, he said something curious. "There's a problem," John says, "because he was not following us." Did you hear what he said. This other exorcist is doing works of power in "your name," but "not following us." It's not enough to follow Jesus and do ministry in his name – you need to be following John and the rest of the twelve. You must see things the way they see them. You need to share their experiences. Their way of doing things. Maybe even their theology.

It's not clear what John's motives were in telling this story to Jesus – but I'm pretty certain that he thought Jesus would join him in his indignation. After all, he's not



asking Jesus whether they should have stopped the man. John's making a definitive statement. "We tried to stop him because he wasn't following us." But instead of getting Jesus' seal of approval or a solid high five, Jesus corrects John and anyone else who might be paying attention.

"Don't stop him;" Jesus says, "because anyone whose getting it done and doing it in my name, is on our side." They can't hurt us. "

It's as if the disciples don't realize how important their work is or how difficult it will be. And so, Jesus gives them a good talking to, so that they might understand that they need to take help wherever and whenever they can. Even the little things and he says, "if someone gives you a drink of water because you're with me – God notices."

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Biblical scholars tend to agree that Mark told this story and maybe even goosed it up a bit in order to help his own community with their particular challenges. We don't know exactly what Mark's folks were arguing over, but we do know there were some tough disagreements, with people taking one side or another. In his telling of this story, "Mark invites his congregation to consider Jesus' story in order to reframe how they think about their lives, their commitments, their identity, and their vision of what constitutes authentic Christian community." [D. Lose]

And he invites us to do the same.

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The first Sunday after we moved into the parsonage, I had changed into grungies and getting ready to take a nap when the doorbell rang. I answered the door to a pleasant woman who wanted to offer me some reading material. I had my suspicions as to who she was with. She was middle aged and on her own, so I knew she wasn't a Mormon. I asked a few questions and she asked a few and sure enough – not a Mormon but a Jehovah's Witness. When I explained who I was and where I worked, the conversation came to a quiet close. After she left, I wondered if we were on the same team or if I was the competition. Did she leave because I was a lost cause or because I was good to go? And what did she think I believed about her?

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These situations aren't reserved just for acquaintances or strangers. Families and friends can be just as suspicious and worse.

In 1972, my Aunt Amy announced she would be getting married. Her fiancé was a nice fellow who loved her and treated her well. He had what looked like a solid future and my grandparents might have been overjoyed, except he was Roman Catholic. In my grandfather's mind this was a mixed marriage and it should be avoided. Not only that, he said he wasn't going to participate. Up until the last few weeks, he threatened to stay home in protest. He did not want his daughter to marry a Catholic and he certainly didn't want her to join the Catholic church. For my grandparents and my parents, who all grew up in Minnesota and South Dakota, there was a list of things that were seen as divisions between Lutherans and Catholics. The list included

- The Pope

- The Virgin Mary
- Worshipping in Latin
- Talking to Saints
- Crucifixes
- Private confession
- Married pastors
- Married pastors with children!

There were unwritten rules about how one behaved. My mother never learned to dance because the Lutherans of that time and place believed it wasn't proper. Neither was smoking or drinking, but did the Catholics share those beliefs? Nope. So what did that say about them!

My grandfather's suspicion and anger were born from being taught that the Roman Catholic church wasn't following Jesus' instructions. They weren't living out their faith correctly. Martin Luther had demonstrated their errors. That was what the Reformation was all about!

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When the day finally came, my grandfather walked Amy down the aisle. As time went by he got over his anger. He and my uncle became fast friends and golfing buddies. They had a great deal of love and respect for each other. But I know that it was hard for him, getting over decades of seeing the Catholics as *them* and the Lutherans as *us*.

It sounds so silly now, but we make distinctions that probably seem equally foolish, or will someday. So, can we change the way we think about our identity and our vision of what makes for authentic Christian Community?

Can we? What if the thing that we disagree about is something important? What if the disagreement is over something we find to be critical and life changing? Can we agree to disagree, without name calling or making stupid assumptions? Can we disagree about something to the core of our being and yet still see the other person as a child of God, worthy of love and care?

David Lose wrote, "In light of Jesus' admonition to his first-century disciples... [could] his twenty-first century disciples...write a different ending to today's gospel?"

"We saw some people, Lord, who were casting out demons, working for justice, advocating for those who have lost their jobs and feel left behind, caring for veterans, protesting injustice, and more, all in your name. They do not follow us. In fact, we really disagree with them. But we did not try to stop them, and they gave us a cup of cold water. And that was cool."

Can we do that? Can we stay salty? Can we live at peace with those who see the world from a different perspective? It's so simple really. All we have to do is love God and love our neighbors. So simple. But it isn't always easy.

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If you've never had lefse (pronounced lef-sa), it is a Norwegian flat bread that looks very similar to a flour tortilla, but it is very different. Soft and so good filled with jelly or butter or even a sausage. My dad swears anything can be wrapped up in a piece of lefse.

I have watched my mother make lefse every Christmas Eve for as long as I can remember. As she is getting on in years and since we aren't always together, I decided I needed to try making my own. I called my mom and asked her for the recipe. She said, "It's very simple. You just make really good mashed potatoes with cream and real butter. Then put them in the frig to cool. After they're cool, you measure the potatoes to see how many cups you have and then add the same amount of white flour. You put the dough back in the frig for a bit and then when you're ready you roll it out like pie crust. You bake each one on a flat griddle on the stove and that's it! Really simple to make.

So I followed all the instructions and made my very first and only batch of lefse. It was terrible. Where it should have been tender, it was chewy. It didn't taste right. It just wasn't good lefse. When I told my mother about it, I said, "I thought this was going to be easy!"

Mom said, "I told you it would be simple, not easy. The recipe is very simple, but making good lefse isn't easy. It takes practice and experience and work."

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Being a Christian isn't always easy, but it is simple. Love God and love his children. When we get a flyer in the email, saying that the Baptists are starting a new kids' program. Well good for them! They're not our competition. We're on the same team.

Another congregation builds a new building. That's great news. They must need the space! Good for them.

Eldad and Medab were able to do some amazing work – but they're not a part of our group. Well, so what! If they are doing good things in the name of Jesus – we should commend them for what they're able to accomplish.

Whether are disagreements are inside this house or out in the community, we need to remember that anyone who isn't against us, is for us and we need to celebrate all the different ways that God makes things happen.

Our call is simple. But our life isn't always easy.

But, we believe that it's worth the trouble. Worth the trouble to listen to those we disagree with. Worth the trouble to support those who are different from us. Worth the trouble to love even our enemies and those who hate us.

It doesn't mean that we let go of what we believe to be true and right – we need to stay salty- but we can also live in peace with our brothers and sisters. Both inside this house and out in the community.

It's simple – love God and love God's children.