

The Invisible Church

Numbers 11:24-30

Mark 9:38-50

”But Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit in them!’”

On this Sunday when we were unnecessarily worried about getting a parking place in our own parking lot because of all the pilgrims on their way downtown to catch a glimpse of the humble Vicar of Christ, we have before us two stories that turn us, ironically, to consider what God is doing beyond the bounds of the official body of believers to accomplish God’s purposes. In both stories, those who have been chosen by God (the seventy elders of the people and the twelve disciples) take issue with the claims of the unauthorized to speak or act in God’s name. In each lesson, the main character—Moses in Numbers and Jesus in Mark—insists that the outsider is not at all outside “what God is doing in the world to make and keep human life human” (Paul Lehmann). Therefore Moses exclaims in response to Joshua’s order that Eldad and Medad be stopped, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit in them,” Likewise, Jesus says to counter John’s censure of an unnamed exorcist, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Or as Christian ethicist Paul Lehmann once put the matter, “After one has laboriously settled the credentials of believing, one always sooner or later is bound to encounter another human being who has never been baptized and appears to be totally unaware of, or indifferent to, the *koinonia*, yet who behaves like the Lord’s anointed. This may be one of God’s happy private arrangements,” Lehmann muses, “in order to keep baptism from becoming an advertising campaign.” On this week when the church has been everywhere in the news, the question posed by these stories would seem to be: How are those inside the church to respond to those outside the church, whose actions appear to embody God’s will and whose words sound, for all the world, like God’s address?

Except that this is not exactly the question posed by these stories. Listen again! Eldad and Medad are Israelites and the unnamed exorcist in Mark is standing in for the community following Jesus in Galilee. Rather than turning our attention to the outsider, both of these stories foreshadow the internecine and endless struggle in the church between those who believe themselves to be the keepers of the faith (the seventy and the disciples) and those in the community who have been accorded no place or no voice or no reality by the church, yet who have been given God’s spirit. If you have read the music notes for this morning, you know the choir is singing music that comes from two communities of faith known in history as the Invisible Church: the Roman Catholic Church in Protestant England and the slave church in 19th century America. The Confessing Church in Germany also comes to mind. So do the Nuns on the Bus!

From the beginning until now, it would seem, God’s people have been at odds with each other, a sibling rivalry of sorts, the firstborn and the second, God’s favorite vs. God’s forgotten children. Yet the Invisible Church also has to do with a theological understanding of the church that was developed precisely in the midst of her divisions and schisms. Therefore if we are to make sense of the church that exists in hiding, we would do well to begin again in the wilderness, when the community asked of its own: Who among us is authorized to speak in God’s name? On whom does God’s spirit rest? Officially, on the seventy; but unofficially, the spirit rested on Eldad and Medad, curiously named minor characters, who had not gone out to the tent of meeting to receive a portion of the spirit, but prophesied, nevertheless, in the camp. Was the spirit that rested on them really God’s spirit? Congregations have been divided, church’s destroyed by characters claiming to speak in God’s name who were not. Likewise, the church has been renewed and the church’s leadership chastened by unlikely and unauthorized characters, speaking God’s truth to assumed ecclesial power. How are God’s institutionally authorized spokespersons to respond to God’s institutionally unauthorized prophets within the community? Is the church more than the eye can see?

The story in Mark involves two communities of Jesus’ followers about thirty-five years after the crucifixion. One was the Jerusalem-centered community represented by the twelve and the other was Mark’s Galilean-centered community represented by the unnamed exorcist. Though it is too early in the church’s history to speak of orthodoxy, the dynamic tension in the story is between those who believed they were the authorized followers of Jesus and those who were simply doing Christ’s work in the world. John whine’s to Jesus much like the unnamed young man and Joshua whined to Moses: “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” Not following *us*! It is a whine repeated endlessly throughout the ages by those in authority in the visible church who equate the following of Jesus with the following of “us,” thereby missing the new things God is doing outside the authorized voices of the church to make and keep human life human. Is the church more than the ear can hear?

A few centuries after Mark wrote his Gospel and in the midst of a controversy that would split the North African church, Augustine wrote of the “true body of Christ” which included those chosen by God in Christ from the beginning, and the “mixed body of Christ” which included the baptized members of the church gathered in time and space on earth. For Augustine, “the visible church on earth is a real but imperfect reflection...of the

true and invisible church, which is completely known only to God.” By the Middle Ages, however, those within the church held that there was no salvation outside the church, a theological claim that narrowed to “there is no salvation outside the Roman church” as Eastern and Western Christianity parted ways. What logically followed in the Western church was a belief that the church was the broker of salvation, linking visible sinners to invisible saints, through such practices as the selling of indulgences.

Then the Reformation happened and with it an understanding of the church that refused to be bound by what the human eye could see. The authorized voice in Rome said that the Invisible Church was a slight of theological thinking that attempted to secure a place eternally for those estranged from Rome temporarily. Undaunted by the critique, Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, invited his congregation in Zurich to think of the church as both a visible and an invisible reality. Believing that the Spirit of God is not bound to the ordinary means of grace, but may work “when and where and how [the Spirit] pleases.” Zwingli “included in the invisible Church all the pious heathen and all infants dying in infancy, whether baptized or not.” John Calvin went on to speak of the church as both the visibly gathered community--where the word is purely proclaimed, the sacraments rightly celebrated--and the invisibly gathered community of all those whom God has called in love through Christ from before the foundation of the world. It was the Reformers’ belief in the existence of the invisible church that encouraged them and provided the seed of ferment that opened the visible church to the reforming Spirit of God’s unbounded grace. In essence, the Reformers reclaimed the belief of the early church, spoken in the second century by Ignatius: “Where Christ is, there is the Church.”

Still the question remains: Where is Christ? Inside or outside the church? In particular, Karl Barth would say some five hundred years later, “Christ is where men [and women] are disconsolate—knowing they have been banished from his presence. Christ is not, and can never be, where men [and women] think they have insured themselves against the anguish of this knowledge....The Church is that visibility which forces invisibility upon our notice, that humanity which directs our attention towards God.” As I watch the coverage of Pope Francis, perhaps it is the Protestant spirit within me, but I would confess that, as he is the Vicar of Christ, I see Christ present not so much in the cathedral and the pomp of clerical processions, but wherever Francis reaches out to touch and bless the least of these, those most likely to be unseen, unheard, forgotten: the child at the airport with cerebral palsy, the aged nun in the wheelchair, the immigrants emboldened by his words, the poor to whom he says, “Bon appetit,” the prisoners he is visiting this morning. But the hope of the Invisible Church gives me eyes to see that Christ is also where I see nothing and the Pope says nothing: with the women who have the spirit of God resting upon them no less than the beautifully dressed men; with the families who have not been celebrated and upheld and strengthened throughout this weekend because they are families with two dads or two moms who have been married by the state if not the church; with the children in this country whose parents may be deported; with the abused whom Jesus addresses in these verses from Mark, counseling the abusers to cut off the offending body parts.

In a slightly different twist on the invisible and visible church, Barth speaks of the visible Church of Esau “where no miracle occurs, and where, consequently [people] are exposed as liars, precisely when they hear and speak about God; and the invisible Church of Jacob—where miracle is, and where, consequently, the Truth appears above the deceit of [human beings]. The two Churches do not, of course, stand over against one another as two things. The Church of Esau alone is observable, knowable, and possible. It may be seen at Jerusalem, or Rome, or Wittenberg, or Geneva [or Philadelphia]....The Church of Esau is the realm where failure and corruption may be found, the place where schisms and reformations occur. But the Church of Jacob is capable of no less precise definition. It is the unobservable, unknowable, and impossible Church, capable neither of expansion nor contraction. It has neither place nor name nor history; men [and women] neither communicate with it nor are excommunicated from it. It is simply the free Grace of God; it is the Beginning and the End.”

“I have a recurring dream,” Tim Safford writes, Rector of Christ Church downtown, as if he were telling his dream to Pope Francis. “At the Sunday Mass on September 27, I am lost in the crowd, watching the action on the Art Museum steps on a jumbo-tron. I see you break the Eucharistic bread, symbolizing the body of Christ. You say, ‘All are welcome at God’s table,’ which will mean not just your Roman Catholic flock, but the larger flock that encompasses all of God’s children.

“In my dream, when you give the Eucharistic bread to those around you, the first hands belong to the parents of Michael Brown or Sandra Bland....Then, I dream you give the bread to Margie Winders, a lesbian teacher who recently was fired from Waldron Mercy for being in a same sex marriage. Then, you share the communion with the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katherine Jefferts Schori, a bishop just like you. Then, with a teenager born in our country, whose parents may soon be deported. Then, I pray, with one still struggling to overcome the violence and shame of being sexually abused by a priest of the Church.

“In my dream, I can’t find where the communion bread is being shared, but I know, deep in my heart, that you, and I, and all of us, are one bread, one body in Christ.” There is more to the church than the eye can see. Thanks be to God for the church visible and invisible. Amen.