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Trinity Episcopal Church

Esther 7: 1 – 6, 9 – 10, 9: 20 – 22

Ps. 124

James 5: 13 – 20

Mark 9: 38 – 50

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Nike has its swoosh. McDonald's has its golden arches. Amazon has its smiley little arrow. Each of these logos, each of these symbols of corporate identity, are legally protected by that ubiquitous little letter "t" in a circle. They are trademarks that tell us instantly who it is that we are dealing with. Who it is that is being represented. And nobody else can use those logos.

Of course, it isn't just products or corporate identities that are legally protected. Thoughts, words, ideas, music and other forms of communication – a.k.a. intellectual property – written or performed, are copyrighted. And inventions of all kinds are patented. It would seem that virtually everything we wear, eat, drink, live in, drive, listen to, read, play with, work with, exercise on or use in any part of our lives is trademarked, copyrighted or patented in one way or another. If we consider patented fragrances in perfumes, grooming and cleaning products, not to mention the proliferation of bottled water, then even the air we breathe and the water we drink can be considered to be owned by someone.

Copyrights, patents and trademarks are designed to limit others' abilities to use without permission the thoughts, designs, hard work and creativity of someone else. The word 'copyright' itself comes from the Latin 'copia' (meaning abundance) and 'right' in the sense of having legal title to something. In other words, whoever holds the copyright on something has legal title to the abundance of that something, and control over whether it can be copied or shared in any way. Only the copyright holder can grant permission for the sharing of that something with others. Copyrights are a way of defining who has the power, who is in control, what can and can't be done, who's legitimate and who's not. The infringement of these property rights, i.e. others trying to usurp that power and control, is frequently in the news.

And it is in our Gospel from Mark today. People want copyright authority and others want to deny it. Only it isn't copyright authority over a piece of music or a book. They want copyright authority over God's Spirit, God's grace, over the power to heal. Some people want the authority to say who can and who can't do what with God's gracious mercy. Some people want to define who can and who can't be God's chosen representatives.

This passage from Mark follows immediately on the heels of the story we heard last week, in which Jesus places a little child in front of himself and tells the twelve that if they want to follow him, they have to be willing to serve this child. Jesus tells them that greatness is about the first being last and servant of all. John appears not to have heard a word Jesus was saying.

Apparently even while these twelve closest followers of Jesus are all still gathered around him, John seeks to ask the question about greatness in a slightly different way. John cannot seem to let go of his need for exclusivity and control. He, along with the other eleven, has been chosen by Jesus. He, along with the rest of them, has chosen to hang with Jesus through everything so far. He, along with Peter and James, was privileged to have that incredibly weird moment up on top of the mountain with Jesus, Moses and Elijah, though of course, he can't very well say anything about that. Jesus has given John and the others the right to go out and proclaim the word of the Lord and to heal. No matter the fact that they, the disciples, were not able to cast out demons because they relied on their own powers

and not the power of God through prayer. Small potatoes in the grander scheme of things. But now, John believes, Jesus needs to know about something.

“Teacher!” John blurts out, self-righteously, as if he is perhaps expecting a pat on the back from Jesus. “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in *your* name. We tried to stop him because he is not following us.” Mind you, John says “following us” not “following *you*.” John tattle on someone who dares to speak in Jesus’ name, who – to John’s way of thinking – is obviously not fit to do so. This person has not traveled over hill and dale with Jesus. This person has not been called by Jesus, or at least to the best of John’s limited knowledge. Jesus has given *this* group the right to use his name, so how does this *other* person get away with copyright infringement? How does this person get away with using power without clear, designated (and presumably coming through the disciples) authority??

Jesus is unruffled by John’s perturbed and sanctimonious attitude. “John, John, John,” you can almost hear Jesus saying. “Don’t stop this person from what they are doing! No one who does ministry in my name can speak ill of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” In other words, Jesus is telling John (and all the others listening in), that it doesn’t matter if this person has been with the others all along. It doesn’t matter if this person isn’t in the circle of faithful people that you, John, recognize. *God* recognizes them. In other words, John, you don’t own the copyright. God does.

While John is still absorbing the shock of Jesus’ open welcome of this outsider’s ministry, Jesus turns to all of the disciples. To drive home his point as strongly as he can, Jesus uses hyperbole to tell his disciples how much they ought to value the chance, the grace, that they have been given by God. That grace is worth more than anything else – worth more than the means of one’s livelihood, worth more than one’s ability to fit into polite society unmarred and untainted, worth more than all that one can see in this world. Discipleship is not to be taken lightly. The grace to be a disciple comes from God, but it is given to anyone who so desires it. And there is no human ‘inner circle’ who can control to whom God gives particular gifts, or who can control who chooses to become a disciple.

This is a hard concept for us human beings, perhaps particularly for those of us in a first world country who are used to some autonomy and power. Since before history began, humanity has been so preoccupied with establishing power, controlling turf, physical or otherwise. With having the right to say who belongs to this group and who does not, who practices religion the ‘right’ way and who does not. With doling out *our* version of grace. Jesus tells the disciples – us – that perhaps we should be more occupied with our common concerns for ministry in the world than by religious (or political) labels.

Putting ourselves into John’s sandals for one moment, who are the ‘unauthorized’ or unexpected ministers in our lives? Who are the people that we would vote ‘least likely to be chosen by God’ in our little Christian yearbook? Who are the people whom we find most unappealing that claim the name of Christian? Who are the people that shock us with the ministry they do in this world and their desire to be faithful to God, even God by another name?

Whoever is not against us is for us, Jesus says. It is oh-so-easy to fall into that Pharisaical trap of being legalistic about who is a Christian and who isn’t, who meets God’s standards for representation and leadership and who doesn’t. We travel in dangerous waters when we presume that God approves or disapproves of the same things we do or don’t. When we deny God’s ability to work outside the lines that we humans are only too ready to draw, we have created an idol and we are not worshipping God.

The grace of God is not copyrighted, trademarked or patented. Nor is it dependent upon our approval. We are called to radical, outsized, abundant love of God, neighbor and self. We are called to radical service. We are called to radical openness. Life, the world, is not a zero-sum game. Anyone who seeks to do the will of God is not somehow a competitor with us for God's grace. Rather, they are a collaborator with us in ministry, in the work that God has given us to do. We are baptized in the name of Jesus and sealed as Christ's own forever. That indelible cross on us, that trademark, that logo, means that Jesus' name owns us, not the other way around.

Let us pray. Holy God, you are as inscrutable as you are gracious. Help us to respect, appreciate, accept and love the gifts with which you so richly bless us. Help us also to respect, appreciate, accept and love all those with whom we share ministry in your name. Help us to love and serve one another while we are loving and serving you. May all that we do be done in love. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. +