

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name.” A few months ago, a friend and former co-worker sent me an interesting article from NPR about gangs and a church in El Salvador. As it details, “people drive around” in the capital of San Salvador “with their car windows closed to avoid petty theft. But when they enter neighborhoods controlled by gangs, they keep their windows open, to show their faces. That way the gangs know they’re not an enemy. In the center of one such [quarter], known as La Dina, a tiny Baptist church sits on a narrow street. In a neighborhood notorious for violence, it is the one place gangs leave alone.” As evangelical Christianity grows in the region, it has gained their respect and endorsement, a rare point of agreement even for the two biggest rivals—Barrio 18 and MS-13. This particular congregation, Ebenezer, has welcomed ten former gang members, many of whom came to embrace the faith when the pastor visited them in prison. The newest member, 24-year-old José Rolando Arévalo, had joined Barrio-18 when he was only 14, after his brother was killed by a competing crew. As he shares, “[The pastor] started talking to me about my life. About everything that had happened, in the gang and with my family.” As the brutally honest exchange unfolded with conversation about God and how the church would accept him, José’s demons were exercised and his heart was penetrated as never before. In just the ten days after he was released from prison this past June, he had attended worship three times. As you enter the worship space, you will find him and other former gang members, easily identifiable by their head-to-toe tattoos, singing along and clapping fervently to songs in praise of Jesus.

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name.” Jesus has *just* finished explaining to the twelve that welcoming the vulnerable and putting ourselves in their shoes is what it means to play on his team. And then John says this. You can almost hear the frustration and

exhaustion ooze from Christ's lips. As I began working on this sermon, that particular thread of thinking injected itself into my brain. And then suddenly the Advocate spirited me away to another seat in the scenario. "*Amanda* said to him, 'Teacher, I saw someone casting out demons in your name. And that someone was an Evangelical, with a capital 'E'.'" Personal transformation. Conversion. Words that had immediately started to raise my presumptions and defensive walls as I had ingested the story about the faith community in San Salvador. Like John, my initially impulsive assessments about the Baptist pastor and church were staining the beautifully emerging masterpiece: the very real inbreaking of God's alternative life-giving community into a place entirely eclipsed by the violent valley of death. "Do not stop him Amanda. Let go of the judgment." With startlingly heavy-laden hyperbole, Jesus strips away our cavalier and self-righteous attitudes about discipleship, as individuals and as a community, framing instead a permanently distinctive body mark in the shade of midnight black.

"Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name." As we flinch at the precision needle of the law sharply digging into our sensitive skin, the Sustainer relocates you and me to yet another seat. Silently gathered around listening to the details about the unknown exorcist and the miracles he was performing in the name of Christ, a sinister voice infiltrates our thoughts. Often our own worst critics, we cast our eyes to the ground as we compare ourselves to this man who seems better at being a disciple than we perceive ourselves to be.

As the days had loomed near after having been asked to preach for worship at the synod conference this past Tues, anxiety, stress and self-doubt injected themselves into my brain. In this competitive culture of ours, the comparison culprit plagued my existence. "Teacher, I have heard some of them speaking in your name; I'm not as good as them!" "My daughter, whoever is not against us is for us. Let go of the judgment. For alongside them, you have purpose and God

empowered gifts.” Excising my insecurity, Jesus pierced a hole in my skin once again and a new color ink was introduced to the developing design.

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name.” As we watch the precision needle of grace slowly sketch upon our bodies, the Spirit transfers you and me to one more seat. Looking around the room we see gathered together in a circle twelve bearded faces of different expressions. Some scowling. Some pained. Some perplexed. All of them are dimly familiar. We just heard the man who appears to be an authority figure say something to the others, and though we’re not sure what it all means, we get the feeling part of it has to do with us. But it doesn’t seem to be degrading. His tone is unmistakably serious, such as one our parents or a teacher might use when lecturing; however, as we sit enveloped by his strong yet gentle arms, there is this pronounced sense of peace and joy.

When the behavior had become toxic to the point of infecting the community, especially for one particular leader, council had decided it was time to start the discipline process as outlined in the constitution. Tasked, as a disciple, to take on the same vulnerability as the one being bullied, I had to confront the person. With my stomach doing flip flops the morning of, there came, like fresh, cool droplets on a parched tongue, the warm embrace of prayers. Augmenting my courage, Jesus inserted another pigment into the ever evolving body art.

Tattooed in the turbulent waters of baptism, we are called. Of that there is no doubt. To what is what we find ourselves asking at times. Tattooed in the turbulent waters of baptism, we are not promised smooth sailing. Rather we are charged with remaining a faithful *follower*, even and especially in the midst of that which costs a great deal. Tattooed in the turbulent waters of baptism though, we are indelibly bonded to one another, and to the stubbornly steadfast God who injects the enduring dye of joy and hope into the skin of life. Amen.