

A danger to the community?

When Jesus' disciples imitate Joshua, the irony is delicious: they have just spectacularly failed to cast out the demon troubling a boy from childhood.

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Preachers who glance at this Gospel lesson and contemplate the delights of contracting swine flu just before Sunday could be forgiven, but a second look reveals an opportunity to teach about Christian community and behaviors that imperil it.

The Gospel's disjointed quality may reflect its composition: various sayings about discipleship may have been linked by catchwords to address issues in the Markan church.

In [part one](#), welcoming the foreign exorcist (38-39) connects to kindness shown to Jesus' disciples by foreigners (40-41) by the common theme of the name of Christ. In [part two](#), the passage about entering life and avoiding [Gehenna](#) (42-48) connects to the community's losing its life ("salt" in 49) by the common theme of fire.

Numbers 11 was chosen to reflect the disciples' confusion in the first half of the Gospel. Eldad and Medad are [among the 70 elders](#) enlisted to help Moses deal with the complaining people. They are meant to receive God's powerful spirit in the tent of meeting with the others. When something prevents their "ordination" as planned, it is not a problem for God, whose spirit causes them to prophesy in the camp where they are.

But [it is a problem](#) for Joshua, Moses' assistant, who protests, "My Lord, Moses, stop them!"

Moses responds with clarity and charity: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them."

When Jesus' disciples imitate Joshua, the irony is delicious: they have just spectacularly failed to cast out the demon troubling a boy from childhood. Mark has recounted at length the story of their fiasco [earlier in the chapter](#). We can't miss it. Then they try to prevent someone who actually *can* cast out demons and does so in Jesus' name with the incredible explanation, "because he was not following us." Us? Wrong pronoun!

Jesus, like Moses, directs their attention past petty turf wars to the work to be done and the spirit of cooperation with others who do it differently. He reminds the parochial disciples that they will be strangers in the surrounding culture, grateful for a cup of water, eager not to be slandered because they bear Jesus' name.

The "reward" mentioned may suggest the logic that led to the compilation of the two parts of the passage. The "little ones" (42) "who believe" are almost certainly disciples who could be scandalized by other disciples. We catch faith, joy and hope from one another; we can also be led astray by one another. Jesus' warning is severe: drowning under the weight of a great millstone would be preferable to the "reward" that awaits the person doing this.

The section about cutting away the hand, foot, or eye that offends to avoid the unquenchable fire may be directed to individuals; it has certainly been read that way over the centuries. But the [context](#) suggests that a member of the community who is leading others astray must be removed for the sake of the "little ones" remaining.

Once more, catchword linkage ("fire") leads to the last idea: a community can lose its character, even its point. Precious communal identity and purpose is compared to salt for at least three reasons:

- In ancient times, salt was valuable for preserving meat and fish; here, holiness that could be corrupted.
- Sharing salt signified friendship ("Be at peace with each other") and common mission.
- Salting an open wound, however painful, leads to healing. Losing a community member, however hard, may be the healthiest way forward.

These are sobering words, not to be acted on quickly or lightly. But this Gospel reminds community members of their responsibility to add to the holiness of the

group and avoid practices that might harm others.