Watching all the candidates in the presidential race (both sides – I'm not being partisan here) reminds me of the long car trips we used to take as a family when my brother and I were young, only today's race is taking place in a very big car with lots of people in the back seat and the American people are in the passenger seat, which in our car, was my Mom's place. When one candidate crosses the imaginary line on the back seat, another yells, “Mom, make him move back!” One makes a face at another and it's, “Mom, make her stop!” Finger-pointing, name-calling, always trying to find a way to blame someone else for starting the bickering, focusing on the faults of the other – that was our back seat in all its glory. For the next year or so, the back seat of the campaign car promises to be loud and rambunctious. Poor Mom is going to get an earful.

It's not all that surprising that the race is going this way. It's human nature to push and shove, bicker and point fingers, to compete with others for what we think are limited resources. It's also human nature to draw boundaries between ourselves and others, to proclaim our own values and ideas as superior to others and to be suspicious of those who fall on the other side of the line we've drawn. It's when we believe that the lines we have drawn are real and that our side is better than the other that real problems start.

The disciples, even though they were close to Jesus and learning a lot from him, were not immune to the kind of back seat behavior we're talking about. In fact, it could be precisely because they were Jesus' chosen few that the disciples drew their lines so closely and were suspicious of anyone who tried to cross them. “Teacher, we saw someone else casting out demons in your name but he wasn't one of us so we tried to stop him.” Someone who wasn't part of the inner circle was daring to act in Jesus' name and Jesus' inner circle had acted swiftly to stop him. The disciples were proud, for they had defended the sanctity of their little group, but Jesus had a different take on the matter. The man who was casting out demons may not have been part of Jesus' inner circle but he was acting in Jesus' name. “Whoever is not against us is for us,” Jesus told his friends. But, the disciples might have complained, “Whoever is not us is not us.” The way they saw it, there were twelve slots allotted for Jesus' entourage and that was it. Peter, James and the others may not have done anything to get those jobs, had not applied for them, had not even known they existed, but Jesus had *chosen* them. Jesus had purposely picked out each one of the disciples and they weren't ready to share their seats in the car with anyone.

Once again, the disciples did not get it. Jesus came into the world to teach, to preach and to heal in God's name. He told the disciples over and over that he would die and, though he would rise again, he would not be with them in the same way anymore. The teaching, the preaching and the healing he had started would have to continue. Did they think the twelve of them would be able to do it? To travel further and further from their home in Galilee to take the gospel into unknown territory, to place it in the hearts of not just Jews but of gentiles? To reach out and heal all those who needed it in the world with just their 24 hands? Did they not realize he could pick others just as he had pick the first 12? Other people would have to step up and share the ministry. In fact, they already were, hence the man casting out demons in Jesus' name.

The disciples had been traveling with Jesus for quite a while. They witnessed Jesus' compassion for people, yet, when a crowd came to hear Jesus speak but hadn't brought any food, the disciples wanted Jesus to send the people home, for the disciples themselves were tired and hungry. Jesus told his disciples that he would soon die and they stuck their fingers in their ears like children who do not want to hear the truth. Jesus tried to tell them another time about what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem and they were silent because they were too afraid to ask him what he meant. Their fear led them to argue among themselves about who of them was the greatest, but when Jesus turned to the back seat, the disciples went mute because they were ashamed of what they had been doing.

When the disciples became afraid and threatened, they did what a lot of us do. They fought amongst themselves. They refused to hear what Jesus was saying, to pray about it, to ask God to guide them into the future. Adapting, growing, becoming part of something far bigger than themselves? Sharing the preaching, the teaching and the healing for the sake of the world? Believing that Jesus could speak in a variety of voices, act in surprising ways, use people the disciples had never thought of to spread his word? It just wasn't happening for the twelve. Yet, when some of them fell away from Jesus, when some betrayed him, when the rest of them were dead and gone, the message of Jesus lived on, reaching into uncharted territory, challenging the powers that rule the world, calling all who believe in him to feed the poor, to clothe the naked, to bear the name of Christ in a cup of water.

The disciples were well aware of the limited resources of the world: popularity, power, and influence, but they forgot that the resources of Jesus are limitless. Love, peace, justice, grace – these come from the well that has flowed from the beginning of the world and will never run out. They come to us freely and generously and are to be passed along at no charge with no expectation of payback. Jesus has been telling his disciples the same thing for two thousand years: It's not about you. It's not about who's the greatest among you, the strongest, the most attractive, the most successful. Jesus says it's about him. It's about his love, a love that is to be shared with the most vulnerable and afraid. It's about justice that lifts people out of the places where they have been knocked down. It's about praying and fighting and working to bring about peace, not as some impossible human dream, but as the real power of God breaking into the world today. It's about getting with Jesus' program or getting out of the way. It's about all Christians giving up the idea that we each have the secret formula to Jesus' kingdom and believing that whoever is not against Jesus just might be for him, that whoever does a deed of power in Jesus' name cannot speak evil of him. It's about shedding our pride and praising the miracle that Jesus can utter even one word of love through the broken vessels that are you and me.

In case you hadn't heard, the Pope has been hanging around our country this week. As Lutherans, we haven't been so cozy with the Pope or the Catholic church, ever since Martin Luther split away from it 500 years ago. But have you heard what the Pope has been saying in our country? Did you hear him challenge our Congress to use its power to heal the open wounds of a planet torn by hatred, greed, poverty and pollution? Have you heard him call for all the world's religions to come together to do the same thing? Have you noticed how the Pope's words sound kind of like those of Jesus?

This week, I was surprised to read Walter Brueggemann's praise for a book written by Bill Tallen. Brueggemann is a well-known and respected Old Testament scholar. Tallen is an outrageous, farsical, cynical performance artist who goes by the name of Reverend Billy. Rev. Billy and the No Shopping Gospel Choir perform in theaters, city streets and malls, where they make fun of and denounce the excesses of American consumerism. Rev. Billy has witten a book, *What Would Jesus Buy?* He has been arrested, sued and called an abomination. Yet, Brueggemann writes that he believes Rev. Billy to be “a faithful prophetic figure who stands in direct continuity with ancient prophets in Israel and in continuity with the great prophetic figures of U.S. history who have incessantly called our society back to its core human passions of justice and compassion.” Core human passions of justice and compassion. Might there be a message of Jesus in someone who mocks the church and our culture at the same time he is dressing up as a preacher?

This week, I listened to a favorite song by Van Morrison with these lyrics, “When will I ever learn to live in God? He gives me everything I need and more. When will I ever learn?” It was as if Morrison was voicing my very own struggle in the form of a prayer. Morrison, a popular artist who, as far as I know, has never been in the Christian section of any bookstore, writes about faith in many of his songs. Is it possible that Jesus could be speaking to me and to others through the words of an Irish folk singer?

Teaching, preaching and healing. These are the work of Jesus and all who follow him. There is plenty of work to go around and there are plenty of ways to do it. We are honored by Jesus to do his work but we are not by any means the only ones doing it. So let us get on with what Jesus is calling us to do and let us believe that Jesus is powerful enough to pull every work that praises him together into one mighty force in this world.

Amen.