

Whoever is For Us

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Mark 9:38-50

³⁸John said to [Jesus,] “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” ³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

⁴²“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.”

Jesus reminds the disciples that anyone who does a good deed in God's name is 'in.' They ought not be upset if a person acts kindly even if he/she isn't following Jesus. That's not the point. God is at work, so don't stop it with squabbling and power plays.

God's grace and peace to you this day! Amen.

We jumped into the story in the middle. Thus, let's take a minute and put it in reverse to find some context.

Right before these verses in Mark Chapter 9, the disciples had been arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest. Was it John? Peter? James or Andrew?

To answer that question, Jesus brings a little child and says, ‘This one. If you welcome this little one, you welcome me and thus you welcome God the Father.’

They can't quite let it go. So, the argument continues. "But Teacher, someone is casting out demons. He's using your name to do it!"

Can you see their red faces? Can you hear them stammering as they get up the gumption to tell their Jesus their opinion? The real kicker came at the end.

"Jesus, he's not one of us."

Ah ha! There it is. This person, doing all these good things, is not one of us!

Isn't it comforting the longing to be best, the greatest, to be recognized by those in power has been happening for centuries? Furthermore, humans draw lines in the sand to indicate who is in and who is out. We see it all the time, yes?

On cop shows, the local cops are on the street and they respond first to the crime. Then the FBI appears out of nowhere and says, "This is our case now, we're taking over." The cops go back to the precinct with their tails between their legs. "How could they just come in here? They don't know this city like we do! It ought to be us, out there!"

Why does this sin live within us? What is it about, who is in or out that matters so very much? Typically in any conflict, there is an underlying story beneath the open argument. Often it goes like this.

"We can't let her in here because she'll upset our group." The understory is one of IDENTITY.

"He uses such big words and is so smart, I just don't think he'd fit in." The understory is EGO. I'm threatened by someone who I think is better than me.

"They will bring new ideas! We like how we do it." Here the understory is FEAR. We fear change, we fear what we don't know, and when we are afraid, we tend to strike out.

"Jesus! He's not one of us." The disciples say.

The fictional stories we make up in our heads about another person or group can be pretty fantastic and can also be completely false. It is easier for our brains to categorize others than to open ourselves to be curious and wonder. Labels don't require much critical thinking and labels keep us safe from what we don't know and what we fear.

Thank goodness Jesus calls them on their stuff right away. “Hey! Whoever is not against us is for us. If this person is doing good in my name, praise God! Furthermore, if he comes over and offers you a cup of water because you say you follow me, He’ll be following me soon too,” Jesus says. Apparently, there is more than one way to do God’s work.

The question is, are we putting more of God’s love into the world, or are we only offering back to the world its own fear, drawing lines in the sand, and intolerant attitudes? Let me say it again...the question is, are we putting more of God’s love into the world, or are we only offering back to the world its own fear, drawing lines in the sand, and intolerant attitudes?

God works through all kinds of people, in all kinds of situations. A colleague of mine ministers on the downtown streets of Denver. He regularly hears gunshots from his living room. He knows the language of the streets and the majority of his parishioners are people of color. This fabulous man doesn’t wear a collar or stand behind a pulpit to preach. Instead, he listens to folks who are regularly high or drunk. He knows each one by name. He calls them “friends.” He knows their stories. They go to dinner, and he gives them rides to work.

Last week, one of his friends called him and said, “What are you doing this weekend?”

My colleague was hesitant to tell her because he didn’t really want trust her to come along. This young woman you see, was regularly high or drunk. She couldn’t get her life together. He just wasn’t sure he could trust her with small children who would be coming to get new shoes with their parents. But he told her anyway.

“I’m headed to Five Points to give out shoes to needy kids and families.”

“Can I come?! Can I come, I’ve been sober for two weeks straight! Can I please come?”

Nervously the pastor agreed and on Saturday he picked her up. She had put on clean clothes and looked lovely. He could tell she had put time into dressing nice. They began to hand out the shoes. The young woman was appropriate and as she knelt before some small children to put some tennis shoes on their feet, my colleague knew he was seeing Jesus at work.

No one had ever trusted this woman before. She was always raging mad or drunk because of a life of trauma. No one had ever given her a chance. This pastor through months and months of steady presence, earned her trust and that day she was able to give back.

Jesus said, "Whoever is not against us is for us. If this person is doing good in my name, praise God!"

God ministers in many forms. I just have an idea that God is at work more than we see. God doesn't only come to our church or Faith church down the street. God is at work in Five Points, too.

The world we live in often wants to pit us against each other.

"You're not one of us!"

"How could they do such a thing?!"

"I don't want those people coming around here."

So who is the greatest?

God. God is the greatest.

God is at work in amazing ways we might never see. Let's put a little more love into the world and join Jesus' ministry.

Amen