

“Not For OR Against”
B, Pentecost 19; Mark 9:38-50
September 30, 2018; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. LET’S REVIEW!

Jesus is having a time with his disciples! Last week’s focus, and the passage right before what we heard today, saw an elbowing-out, jostling on the road scene with the guys, that Jesus nips in the bud.

Do you remember how he did it? First of all, he got a little nosey and asked what that “was about back there?” and confronted their squabble. Good thing for a leader to do, right?

Next he took a little child in his arms to give them an unmistakable, memorable message.

³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking

it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

II. NOT PART OF US!

And now, today – he’s no sooner gotten those words off the tip of his tongue when John butts in:

Hey, Teacher! We saw some dudes up the road challenging the evil spirits – casting them out of people!

“Cool!” Says Jesus. “Praise God! People are being healed! Set free from the chains that bind.”

“But, Jesus! Hold on! They’re doing it in your name! Isn’t that copyrighted?! They can’t do that! They’re not with our company. We knew you wouldn’t like that, so we told them to stop it right away.”

“Can I talk to you about that raise now, Jesus?”

And Jesus wept. Or, did a face palm, or something! Maybe he rolled his eyes – who knows?

We *do* know that he spoke up and didn’t just go along with the plan that he disagreed with.

³⁹⁻⁴¹ Jesus wasn't pleased. "Don't stop him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down. If he's not an enemy, he's an ally. Why, anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side.

Count on it that God will notice.

"Whoever is not against us is for us."

III. FALSE BINARIES

I've been pondering that line all week and looking around for places where that's true in our community and in our faith lives – and where we might bump up against that teaching –or at least forget it.

I had breakfast with Christina and little Oliver Sterzing the other day. They were visiting BV briefly, since Oliver couldn't go back to daycare yet after his broken collarbone.

Christina has been watching my posts on Facebook about the sermon series this Fall and was puzzling over: WWJL. What does that *mean*? She thought she'd figured it out: "Who Would Jesus Love?"

Yes! That's a great one too! I hadn't put that all together before and it's perfect for a "sub-theme" – the sub-question to ask throughout.

Who *would* Jesus love?

We need to ask that question in every circumstance and situation we find ourselves—especially when faced with either/or's all around. It's no secret we live in divisive times when it's easy to forget that basic question of our faith: Who would Jesus Love, as we're asking: Where Would Jesus Lead?

Christina *also* said she'll never forget when they were new to town here and she came to choir practice. Someone said to her: "You don't like in that SOUTH MAIN place, do you?!"

Ah....South Main vs. Main street! Old timer vs. newcomers! Old blood vs. new blood.

One of many "versus" that we drum up; sides of the street (literally) that we choose to walk on –here and everywhere!

Some of the others that come to mind are: Those who voted *one* way in the last election; those who voted the *other* way.

Serving *in* the church or serving in the wider community. Inside our doors and tribe, or reaching out.

Members of the church or non-members—active or *in*.

Healing or Curing on the Joys & Concerns list?

Paper or plastic? How about cloth?!

Raised beds or gardening on the ground?!

Christians have been doing this “versus thinking” for centuries – it’s nothing new!

People lost their lives over these debates: “Are they for us/with us or against us?”

We believe Christ was half divine and half human. Well, we believe Christ was all both. Or, we believe Christ was a good example of a human being and taught us a lot, but it was humans who made him divine, not God.

Or, the wine and bread actually *become* the body and blood of Christ in Communion. OR, they become LIKE them; or they’re merely symbols. And every position in between.

On a lighter note, sometimes our choosing sides in the family gets right down ridiculous—at least comical.

It's no longer all in the family! Republican Rep. Paul Gosar is slamming his Democrat opponent in his Arizona reelection race for capitalizing on "family political differences" after his opponent launched a TV campaign ad that featured six of the incumbent's siblings urging people not to vote for him.

Gosar is the oldest of 10 children -- 7 Democrats, 2 Republicans and 1 independent, according to his congressional website. He told CNN:

"You can't pick your family. We all have crazy aunts and relatives etc and my family is no different. I hope

they find peace in their hearts and let go all the hate," Gosar said.

He added, "To the six angry Democrat Gosars -- see you at Mom and Dad's house!"

IV. ALL IN THE FAMILY

Paul, in teaching the Way of Jesus, and carrying on his message, has something to say about the false binaries we construct.

28 In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:28

So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus.

Colossians 3:11: It doesn't matter if you are a Greek or a Jew, or if you are circumcised or not. You may even be a barbarian or a Scythian, and you may be a slave or a free person. Yet Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

In our day, that exhortation might sound like this: It doesn't matter if you are a Born-again Evangelical or a Mainline Protestant. There is no difference in God's eyes between American, European, Canadian; between white and brown or black skinned; between gay or straight, trans or questioning; between Republican, or Democrat or Independent; between rich or poor; legal or illegal. For you are all one in Christ –and *that* is what matters!!

There was a lot of disputing in Paul's day, as to *which* of the Jesus Preachers had the "real message"; whom was to be believed; which apostle actually hung out with Jesus in person and had a better "corner on the truth"

The church members of Peter's church had some different practices than those of James', and so on.

I Corinthians 3:4-6

4For when one of you says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings

? 5What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? They are servants through whom you believed, as the Lord has assigned to each his role. 6I planted the seed and Apollos watered it, but God made it grow....

V. JESUS CONTINUES....

Back to Jesus and our passage.

Jesus doesn't stop there with "everybody's welcome!" It's not a free for all –not "anything goes" as long as you claim to do it in my name, than whatever "it" is, you're free to do. There's another part to this equation.

There's a "but."

"Hey! Remember this child I'm holding in my arms? Yah, that one there. Remember how I said you have to be like a child to "get it?" Well, now you've hopped to a whole 'nother subject and missed the point.

Jesus is straddling an extremely important path here – yes, welcome all who seek to serve and love and heal in my name – whatever they call it –whatever group or club name they purport.

But....if their motives are NOT holy – if they harm the innocent and vulnerable of any age – any child of God, then they are no longer welcome – they must be resisted and swimming with the fishes!

Open the eyes of your heart. Your mind, your arms. Enough already with this vying for power and competing with the other groups who are also trying to do good in the name of the Holy One and our share humanity. Want to know who is the greatest, and doing the most good? The most innocent, guileless, vulnerable ones.

VI. THE BUT

"If they're not against us they're for us." But. They *might* be against the children. Consider that. What if they are against what we stand for: That God's love is for *all the little children of the world?* Of any age or stage in life – God's children all.

In the very next verse, Jesus lays out some pretty harsh words about those who are not in synch with his mission. Those who *are* against us must be challenged.

⁴²"On the other hand, if you give one of these simple, childlike believers a hard time, bullying or

taking advantage of their simple trust, you'll soon wish you hadn't. You'd be better off dropped in the middle of the lake with a millstone around your neck.

Whoa! Watch out! In a nutshell: **Those scandalizing the little ones who trust** deserve to sleep with the fishes.

VII. SUFFER THE CHILDREN

We've been hearing a lot in the news about violations of trust and personhood – of the most vulnerable among us. Children of God of every age have been harmed—caused to stumble—by those in a position of power over them.

Some of these assaults took place many years ago and have devastated lives for decades. Some have been re-traumatized as they've only found the courage in adulthood to declare their God-given right to be heard and healed.

The *reaction* to these brave souls has been almost as bad—perhaps even worse—than the original assault. Blaming the victim, silencing the courageous, even death threats by those who would seek to continue the denial and rug-sweeping, is a collective sin in our society.

There's also been a cry, from Christians and Christian churches to these victims to “forgive and reconcile” and be quiet—even excuse the violence – in the name of Jesus. As if that's what Christ's church should be about!

Woe to us, Jesus would say, for causing these little ones –ANY little ones, not matter what age or stature, to stumble. “Little children who trust” can be anyone who is vulnerable, innocent, un-corrupted.

No more false dichotomies here. Jesus is neither for nor against our petty squabbles and jostling for who gets to be first –the greatest. Jesus IS for those who are being harmed, not heard and need a source of Trust. “Jesus is on our side” when we care for the least of these. Or, when we *are* the least of these.

VIII. BE AT PEACE

And then, after all that! Jesus wraps all this deep stuff up in one short verse – Hey, after you've figured out who's against us, who's for us and how to be open like a little child, and yet protect the vulnerable child in all of us: “Be at peace with each other! Oh, and have a nice day!”

What does *that* mean?! How does one do that, in this complicated world we live in?

One scholar puts it this way: “The way of Christ is one of healing and wholeness. It doesn't matter how it's done; it only matters that Christians bring healing and wholeness into the world. We don't need to worry

about what others are doing to facilitate creating the Realm of God. If they aren't against us, they are for us."

Look at the intention. What's in the heart? The family speaking out against their brother in Congress: is that a Republican/Democrat petty squabble, or a foundational resistance to what he stands for – values and actions? The siblings SAY they think he's causing harm and doing unethical things, and they are trying to protect others by urging them to vote for his opponent.

"Be wise as serpents and gentle as doves" Jesus says in scripture as well.

We must discern the spirits, ask questions of the motives, look at the fruits that are produced by others. Are they embracing any and all of the children of God, or causing one (or many) to stumble?

IX. HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

This week the Interim Conference Minister, Ron Patterson, and his wife stopped by for a visit. They loved seeing the church and the grounds and hearing about all our ministries here: Bazaar, Backpack, worship, space and welcome for the community, and especially the Garden!

I showed them the garden and reminded them it was made possible by a conference "In the Mud Grant", which they knew, as they'd seen the updates and pictures. They loved the garden and immediately

noticed the "Deer Fence". Folks in Denver or other places don't have those things around their gardens!

As a garden needs to be rid of weeds and protected by a deer fence, in order to thrive and grow and produce, so our efforts, ministries and hearts need gardeners to come alongside us and help us – in Christ's name

It's not an easy path to straddle, to be good gardeners of our gardens, resources, produce and flowers.

I was especially proud of our church a few years back when we were presented with one of these "discerning moments." Our Bazaar (all 92 years of it!) has been held on the First Saturday of November since God walked the earth. One year we learned that *two* other churches were holding theirs the same day! What nerve!

We could have chased them off like Jesus' disciples did with seeming interlopers. Or, we could discern the spirits and determine that they were doing what they do in the same name and purpose – mission—that we do. Gathering people together in community to share our gifts and talents and raise money for worthy mission projects here and all over the world.

So, what did our Bazaar Committee do? They designed a punch card and door prizes! If you went to all three Bazaars that day, you got a gift. In addition to the gift of fellowshiping with others all over our community and from far away—many came that day

from other places, *because* there were 3! It was Bazaar Day in Buena Vista!

“If they are not against us, they are for us.” Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Jesus has showed us how to straddle a difficult road with grace and love—may we follow his lead. Amen.