

“For or Against”

Mark 9:38-41 – September 27, 2009

INTRO: This is one of those passages from the Bible that rather than speaking to the original twelve disciples, we believe it probably was addressed to the early church after the time of Jesus' life on earth—telling them about a burning issue in their day. The early church may have encountered non-believers who respected Jesus as a person of great spiritual power, yet they weren't really in the church. We will hear about being in the “in crowd” or being outside that crowd.

Northeast of London, there is a town called Ely, with a cathedral which was built in the 11th century. There is an enormous Lady Chapel in one wing of this cathedral, dedicated to Mary—that's how it got its name. And every statue in that Chapel has been defaced. During the Reformation, people believed that all the statues in the Roman Catholic Churches should be destroyed because people were worshipping the statues rather than worshipping God. So regardless of whether the statues in Ely were saints or likenesses of animals or people, all the heads were knocked off those statues.

What happened in that Lady Chapel is an example of one group of people deciding what was right, and who was right. And if you didn't believe what a certain group believed you were wrong. There was no room for persons of differing beliefs, yet all the parties involved were people who called themselves Christian.

In the late 1500's, Elizabeth I who was Protestant, beheaded her Catholic cousin, Mary Queen of Scots, because of issues of power and religion. They are buried on opposite sides of Westminster Abbey. But there is a monument to them both, close to Elizabeth's grave, which says: “Near the tomb of Mary and Elizabeth, Remember before God all those who, Divided at the Reformation by different convictions, Laid down their lives for Christ and conscience sake.” That's yet another example, that in the name of religion, we sometimes create great chasms between people.

In Belfast, Ireland, a Catholic priest, a Protestant minister, and a Jewish rabbi were engaged in a heated theological discussion. Suddenly an angel appeared in their midst and said to them: “God sends blessings upon you. Make one wish for peace and your wish will be fulfilled by the Almighty.” The Protestant minister said, “Let every Catholic disappear from our lovely land. Then peace will reign supreme.” The priest said: “Let there not be a single Protestant left on our sacred Irish soil. That will bring peace to this island.” “And what about you, Rabbi?” asked the angel. “Do you have no wish of your own?” To which the Rabbi replied. “No, I have no wish. Just attend to the wishes of these two gentlemen and I shall be well pleased.”

The other two, with whom he had religious and theological differences, were going to be gone—he would be happy. We may have an underlying thought that if someone isn't with us, they must be against us. But that's not what our reading today says. It says: “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Jesus responds to the disciples objections to what they see as an unauthorized use of Jesus' name in a healing by someone who's not in their crowd—a kind of free-lance ministry by someone who's not associated with the twelve disciples, the insiders, Jesus' chosen team. They've made a significant sacrifice to hit the road and follow him, and now Jesus is saying that somebody else might be able to do their work just as well, or better—somebody else who might not believe exactly as they believe. Jesus basically calls them on the carpet. Why stop someone who is doing God's work? So what if the healer isn't among their group. The work of ministry belongs to anyone who is witnessing to health, healing and wholeness and the power of God in the world.

The response of Jesus cuts across the common parochial attitude of possessiveness toward God and hostility toward any person or group whose patterns of worship, belief, or theology are different. The story is one which encourages openness, acceptance, and tolerance. Thinking we are an exclusive group will derail discipleship and dilute the meaning of what God's new world could look like, every time. In Jesus' lifetime, he consistently challenged the practice of confining God's action to one's own race, one's own religious institution, one's own political party, one's own country.

This story reminds us that still today, people of faith create great chasms between them and other people who are also seeking to be faithful. In some respects we haven't gotten much further along with the idea that “whoever is not against us is for us.”

Mary Elia, a Presbyterian pastor once served a mid-sized PCUSA congregation whose members loved to loathe the non-denominational church across the street. Although Mary's folks never

bothered to visit this congregation, they considered their community to be everything that the Presbyterians were not. The Presbyterians prided themselves on their high liturgy and lofty intellectualism, and they condemned the other church for worshipping in a manner the Presbyterians considered insubstantial and for attracting a membership they deemed infantile. Mary's folks even complained about the increased traffic resulting from heavy attendance at their services! Instead of responding to the success of the neighboring church with a reevaluation of their own programs, they clung to their old habits. They increased only in bitterness and self-righteousness rather than in membership and ministry.

One wonders what opportunities were missed because, like the disciples, the Presbyterian congregation considered those Christians outside their community to be competition rather than partners in Christ's service. (Mary Charlotte Elia)

"Our desire for certainty, our need to be right, and our tendency to miss the point have conspired to keep Christians from experiencing unity, and instead have led to endless divisions within the Christian faith. In America alone there are over two thousand different Christian denominations and tens of thousands of churches that are independent and nondenominational churches. Though all claim to be followers of Jesus, must have divided over matters of doctrine or ways of practicing their faith. Each feels that their doctrine and practice is more faithful than the others." (*Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, Adam Hamilton)

Jesus was speaking to a situation where somebody outside the inner circle, had healed someone, had compassionately helped someone else. Healing may take place, Christian to Christian, Jew to Jew, Muslim to Muslim, or maybe simply human being to human being—across all those lines.

Rabbi Aryeh Sufrin was in the London Underground when four Muslim extremists detonated their explosive backpacks on July 7, 2005. 52 commuters were killed in that explosion. Rabbi Sufrin survived. "The carriage [the bombers were in] was just one in front of me. What if the guy had seen me when he was getting on?" the Rabbi asks. "Would he have chosen my carriage? Would he have stood next to me?" Determined not to retreat into what he calls the "paranoia attached to the Jewish experience," Rabbi Sufrin set about doing his part to bridge the divisions cleaved that day. Rabbi Sufrin has an office at the Chabad Lubavitch Centre—spiritual home to local Hasidic Orthodox Jews. The center is in Gants Hill in east London, a sometimes scruffy London suburb home to an estimated 15,000 Jews and 30,000 Muslims. "If [a bombing] can be someone's message in evil, then we have to find the opposite in good," he says. He didn't have to wait long to try to rebalance the equation. A Muslim man in his 20s, racked by heroin addiction, appeared at the center's door. Desperate to quit his habit, he had sought out Drugline, an addiction support group founded by Sufrin 18 years ago and housed in the building. "It cannot be right to abandon people when they most need help." Sufrin opened the door and offered the same crisis intervention, advice, and counseling he has offered to Jews since 1990. What came next was less expected. Procuring a £115,000 (\$190,000) grant from the local government council, and with the support of a progressive local Muslim imam, Haroon Patel, the diminutive rabbi launched a ground-breaking interfaith drugs project. Dubbed "Joining the Loop," it provides advice in Bengali, Urdu, and Gujarati—three languages spoken by Southeast Asian Muslims—and crisis support to Muslim addicts and their concerned families with nowhere left to turn. (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 9-20-09)

Rabbi Sufrin certainly is finding ways to help people heal, and in the process isn't asking them whether they are Jewish or not—he's responding to a need. And who is to say this is or is not God's work?

When my parents moved into a retirement community affiliated with the Grace Brethren Church, I was first told that I would be welcome to come and preach here, for one of their weekly chapel services—they always needed preachers. Upon moving in though, that invitation was rescinded. The staff person who had originally spoke with us, apologized, because she overlooked the fact that the Grace Brethren denomination doesn't ordain women. Yes, that may have been an uncomfortable moment, but it doesn't mean that those people in that place, were bad or mean. My parents had good care there. And the Grace Brethren people are certainly about God's work, as they see it.

"Imagine an average street in an average city, in an average country. Let's imagine Person X lives in a house on this street. Next door is a Hindu, and on the other side is a Muslim. Across the

street is an atheist, next door to them an agnostic, and next door to them, someone from Ohio. Imagine Person X becomes a Christian. Maybe she read something or had friends who inspired her to learn more, or maybe she had an addiction and through recovery she (connected to God). However it came to be, she became a follower of Jesus. She starts living out Jesus' teachings, actually (believing) that she can become a compelling force for good in the world. She is becoming more generous, more compassionate, more forgiving, more loving. If we are her neighbors, we're thrilled about her new faith and are grateful for a neighbor like this. The good news of Jesus is good news for Person X and for all her neighbors too—for the whole street. The most powerful things happen when the church surrenders its desire to convert people and convince them to join. It is when the church gives itself away in radical acts of service and compassion, expecting nothing in return, that the way of Jesus is most vividly put on display." (*Velvet Elvis*, Rob Bell)

"What if all 224 million Christians in America were actually working together to shape a nation that looks like Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God, where poverty does not exist, where people practice justice, where love of neighbor is universally practiced?" (Adam Hamilton)

Does that sound impossible? Well, the longer we think it is impossible, it will be. The world desperately needs us to work together, in this church, and with a variety of people beyond our walls. Wherever and whenever health and healing can happen, no matter who is involved, let's not be too quick to judge, for perhaps that's the work of God taking place in an unlikely place, by what we might call unlikely people.

--Sue Burwell