

## “Choosing Sides”

Neil Engle  
October 1, 2006  
Text: Mark 9:38-50

First Christian Church  
115 Courthouse Plaza  
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

You've heard me speak before of my regard for the Riverside Church in New York City. Among the preachers who have served Riverside are Harry Emerson Fosdick and my hero, William Sloane Coffin. James Forbes began serving that congregation in 1989. Forbes announced last week that he would be leaving the historic church next year. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Forbes stated, "My approval has been to believe that I am here by divine appointment and that I should expect that I would be challenged sometimes with merit and sometimes perhaps without." In the interview, Dr. Forbes admitted that like any other congregation, Riverside has had its "share of congregational squabbles and conflicts." One layperson interviewed said his retirement would be a loss for the church, while another member stated that "his eighteen years here have shown no accomplishment." One of the ushers was quoted in the article as saying, "There are some who are 100% with him and some who don't care if he goes."

Standing with or standing over against. In support of or in opposition to. Did you hear the contrast in the scripture passage from Mark? By the end of chapter 9, Jesus' earthly ministry is rushing toward a climax. He's offering a crash course in discipleship to prepare His disciples for what's to happen in Jerusalem – to prepare them for their future role. Last month we talked about the disciples' obsession with greatness. Remember? Jesus overheard their discussion and told them the greatest were those who welcomed children and those with no social standing. The disciples are still concerned with their own importance. In today's text, the disciples discuss their importance as a group.

John, the brother of James, acts as a spokesperson for the other disciples. They had spotted outsiders who were employing the name of Jesus for the purpose of exorcism. There were at the time of Jesus, rival teachers and messiahs; the disciples were aware of competing groups and movements. By the time Mark got around to recording these stories, early Christians had already begun to organize around competing practices and interpreters of the Christ. John says to Jesus, "You know, Rabbi, when we were out doing our jobs, we saw a man healing in your name. Since he wasn't one of us, we told him to knock it off. He claimed he was using your name to do good things, but well, I told him that since his name was on the membership roll at the group down the street, he'd better cease and desist before we got a restraining order against him. Isn't that what you wanted me to do, Master?"

Jesus responds. "Well, John, you blew it again. What is it with the twelve of you? Haven't we talked about being clique-ish? Didn't I just remind you the other night around the campfire that we don't have a corner on doing good? Next time, you guys, don't stop someone doing good deeds. After all, someone who ministers in my name will find it impossible to turn around and talk badly about me. Remember, it is the name of the master, not the servant, that is important. Whoever is not against us is for us."

Now the disciples are surprised by Jesus' response, and I believe their reaction is understandable. It seems Jesus is being just a bit sentimental. Don't worry that this exorcist graduated from a medical school in Acapulco. Who cares that his credentials are unorthodox. If he's doing good, leave him alone. If he isn't against us, he is for us. This is the proof text of the person who says, "It really doesn't matter what you believe – as long as you are sincere."

It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere? Baloney! That slogan is a cop-out, an excuse for not taking the time to think things through. History teaches that beliefs do make a difference. Terrible things have been done by people who sincerely believed what they did was right. Adolf Hitler was sincere. David Koresh was sincere. Osman bin Laden is sincere. Wrong thinking can lead to chaotic, miserable living. Suppose sitting in the waiting room at a doctor's office, someone bursts their door. "Hey, doc, there's a college freshman majoring in pre-medicine down the hall and he just healed a broken leg even though he's never had a course in orthopedics." Your physician says, "Well, forbid him not. If he's not doing harm, he must be doing good!" No! That's not the way we work, is it? Do we really want to embrace that statement of Jesus that "whoever is not against us is for us?" Sorry, I still don't buy it.

How do we know this well meaning, but uncertified exorcist isn't creating a host of other psycho social problems with his good deeds? Don't we need to make some proper distinctions? President Bush told the world, "You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror." Shouldn't we have similar thinking when it comes to our faith. Either you're with the church or you're against it? But that's not what Jesus says. He

says, “He that isn’t against us is for us.” Think about some of the institutions and forces in society – education, sports, business – they’re not explicitly against the church, does that mean they’re for the church? What about persons who emerge from a religious mindset?

Someone who thinks they’re having a positive impact and invoking the name of Jesus doesn’t make it so. Case in point? Fred Phelps and his hatred of homosexuals. Or what if someone really does what appears to be good in the name of Jesus? Do they always deserve our praise? “Whoever is not against us is for us.” You know, one helpful tactic when one encounters a biblical text that isn’t to our liking, is to rummage around in the Bible and find another biblical text which makes a totally opposite point. One text cancels out the other.

Fortunately, such a text is available: Matthew 12:30. “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” Mark’s Jesus pleads for openness. Matthew’s Jesus seems to exclude. Thank goodness for the contradiction. Pass the Matthew 12:30, please. Or is there a contradiction? In Mark, Jesus says, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” The “us” refers to His disciples. In Matthew Jesus says, “Whoever is not with me is against me.” The “me” refers to Jesus. Apparently, it’s permissible to be outside the bounds of the disciples, to have less than perfect membership credentials, but it is not permissible to be against Jesus himself. That sounds like quite a different matter from merely mushy-headed tolerance and intellectually lazy openness. It is not a matter of baptizing the great unwashed majority of those who have not yet made up their minds. It is a matter of being with Jesus. “Whoever is not with me is against me.”

How do we get on Jesus’ side? It’s not about right theology or doctrine, or claiming allegiance with the one true church or the one pure group. The main thing is that we are with Jesus. And how do we do that? That’s the issue. Jesus’ own life defines true discipleship. Can we cite anywhere in the gospels where Jesus checks out His disciples on matters of correct doctrine or insist they recite a creed? Rather, in this story he urges His disciples to get on His side; namely, the side of those who match works with deeds, to be ready to be surprised and to rejoice whenever good work is done, whomever the agent.

Knowing that Jesus’ kingdom is bigger than any church’s little definitions, we can expect a rich array of responses to the presence of Christ. Disciples are known as much by their offering of the cup of cold water as by their verbal proclamation of faith.

Jesus told a story of two boys and a father. The father told them to go out and plow his field. One boy, who wanted to please, said, “No problem, Pop. I’m on my way.” But he didn’t follow through. An hour later he was still playing Playstation 2. The other son, the problem teenager, said, “Get a clue, Dad. I’m a high school senior and I don’t have to do anything.” But an hour later, this son with tattoos and a tongue stud was out slaving away in the field in the hot sun. Jesus said, “Okay, gang, which son did the will of his father? The one with the right words, or the one with the right actions? Then Jesus said, “Tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of God before you good ones.” It’s not one of Jesus’ better stories.

Let us pray: We thank you God for Jesus’ strong, clear message that your Kingdom includes all whose lives evidence the indwelling Christ. We pray that we might learn an inclusivity in Christ, for the grace to personally receive your caring through whomever you choose. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

(Thanks to Leonard Sweet for some of the imagery used in this sermon.)