

9.29.2024 Pentecost 19

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Numbers 11:14-16, 24-29; Psalm 19:7-14; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

“Whoever is not against us is for us”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

How well do you do with difference? Are you interested in different people, views, and thoughts, or do they frighten you? Do you welcome difference, or do you fight against it?

Jesus’ disciples didn’t do very well with difference. When confronted with someone different casting out demons in Jesus’ name, the disciples tried to stop them. Jesus’ response, “*Whoever is not against us is for us*” is remarkable because it reveals that Jesus was no ordinary religious leader interested only in his own flock. Jesus understood that deeds done in his name will always work against evil. Jesus was saying that he has sheep in other flocks. Imagine if Jesus’ name never spread beyond his own disciples – the church would have never spread around the world to every nation and language.

These words, “*Whoever is not against us is for us*” hold great meaning for me. For years in Japan, I was the stranger – the one who was different ethnically, linguistically, and religiously. During my service in Japan, daily I worked with difference. Though I was different, I was welcomed into the family of my bride and embraced as a son. In my work as a Lutheran seminary professor, I worked ecumenically among many different denominations. For almost ten years I served on the executive board of the Japan Association of Theological Education, planning seminars for the faculty of nearly every Christian university and seminary in Japan. In this work I encountered not only theological differences, but I also became profoundly aware of the insights that each denomination shares through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

I also lived among people of different faiths in a vastly Buddhist land. I came to appreciate the insights that Buddhist colleagues and friends made about Christianity. Buddhist friends often praised Christianity for God’s grace and for the name of Jesus. My True Pure Land Buddhist friends often spoke of the power of the name in which they believe, Amida Buddha, a name that saves by grace. Through the witness of my Buddhist friends, I came to believe more firmly in the grace of the name in which I believe, Jesus Christ. My Zen Buddhist friends spoke of the nothingness of the self as the path to seeing reality and knowing enlightenment. Buddhist words about nothingness remind me that in following Jesus’ call to deny myself I am becoming nothing that I might gain everything in Christ. Living with difference has broadened my faith to

accept those who are different from me, knowing that in the mystery of God's grace the Holy Spirit is alive and at work in others around me.

*"Whoever is not against us is for us"* is Jesus' promise that we will find fellow believers, coworkers, and spiritual friends among people of other denominations and faiths. Jesus is attempting to open, not only his disciples, but also each of us to the living power of working in his name with others who may be profoundly different from ourselves. What a blessed message for our highly divided and conflicted world!

In today's gospel, when the disciples were confronted with someone different casting out demons in Jesus' name, they acted like gatekeepers and guardians, attempting to control Jesus' name. The disciples thought that only they, and no one else, could work in Jesus' name. They were like Joshua who said of two men prophesying in the camp, *"My lord Moses, stop them!"* Moses replied, *"Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"*

We continue to find prophets among all denominations, faiths, and people. Yet since Jesus' day, the church has struggled with what I might call the "Gatekeeper Complex." We feel that we must be the guardians and gatekeepers of God's work – all while Jesus tells us, *"Whoever is not against us is for us."*

Anyone who has been around churches knows the "Gatekeeper Complex." Gatekeepers label people for their denomination, religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender, or identity. Gatekeepers check your identity card at the church door, seeking to exclude people because they seem different. Yet Moses and Jesus remind us that we do not know the mind of God, and we do not always know upon whom God has set his Spirit.

In his response to the disciples, Jesus suggests that such "gatekeeping" is a sin. We are to welcome with a cup of water all who work in Jesus' name in the world. It sounds so easy! Yet how often have we refused others because of their denomination, religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender, or identity? How often has our gatekeeping limited God's work in our very midst?

If we respond to Jesus, "Lord, I've done no such thing," I ask you: When have you been indifferent to racism, discrimination, war, economic disparity, or violence because it has not touched you directly? When have you not listened to God's prophetic voices in church, society, and government simply because their label, group, or party is different from your own?

Jesus' harsh words about cutting off a hand or foot, or tearing out an eye are meant to wake

us from our slumber, asking, “Is there something in your life that you might change, deny, abandon, or let go of, so that you might embrace and help your neighbor who appears different from you?” Jesus’ is asking if we can discard those parts of ourselves that get in the way of God’s call to daily self-denial and again follow Jesus.

Jesus’ words, “*Whoever is not against us is for us*” are words of tolerance and trust. Jesus’ words remind us of the magnitude of the God’s love and work in this world. We cannot possibly always know all whom God is calling. Jesus’ words encourage us to open the door of the church as widely as possible to all whom he is calling. A church that welcomes all people in Jesus’ name is a church seeking to be a prophetic voice in the world. A church that welcomes all in Jesus’ name has salt in itself and sees the salty uniqueness of others.

Jesus was talking to people who knew about salt. Salt is an indispensable preservative. Salt transforms flavors. The “saltiness of the gospel” is its preservative character of love for this world – God’s love is what preserves you to love others in this world. In a world that excludes and shuts out difference, the saltiness of the gospel leads you to self-denial, opening you to love others. In a world of conflict and war, the saltiness of the gospel helps you to be at peace with others. In a world of self-serving profit, the saltiness of the gospel flavors you to work so that others might also profit.

*Whoever is not against us is for us.* The Holy Spirit continues to be at work among difference. Remember that God has met you in your own difference with forgiveness and love.

*How well do you do with difference?* Jesus has made a difference in your life so that you might become the difference for your neighbor. Amen.