

Sermon for September 30, 2018 “Choosing up Sides”

Mark 9:38-50

When I was growing up we had the flattest yard in the neighborhood. It was actually on a slope, but it had no rolling hills or large trees in the middle of it. So it became the ball field for the neighborhood kids. And when we all got together we would choose up sides. The two oldest and most athletic would be captains and they would divide the rest of us up to try to have even teams. Choosing up sides was a part of the fun. Sometimes you would be on the same team with your closest friend. Sometimes you would end up on the other side and you could playfully pit your skills against theirs. As kids choosing up sides was all in fun.

Choosing up sides; however, becomes more serious as we grow up. The side you are on often determines your social network and your acceptability. Are you a nerd or a jock? Are you Clemson or Carolina, liberal or conservative, Christian or Secular, Democrat or Republican, PC or Mac, Apple or Android?

Even in the church we choose up sides. Are you conservative or moderate? Are you mainline or evangelical? Are you fundamentalist or charismatic? Are you contemporary, or traditional, or liturgical? Are you Protestant, or Catholic, or Orthodox? I like to play with people. I tell them I am a postmodern orthodox, progressive evangelical with charismatic overtones and liberation leanings.

But it all comes down to US and THEM.

Jesus' disciples ran into the same thing in their day. Someone they did not know was casting out demons in Jesus name! Was he one of us, or one of them? He was using Jesus' name and he was casting out demons apparently successfully. But he had never registered for any of their demon casting seminars; which are offered quarterly in convenient locations. The disciples decided that they needed to nip this unauthorized sanctifying activity in the bud!

Then they reported to Jesus what they had done. The question is what were the disciples seeking from Jesus? Did they want to ask Jesus if they had done the right thing? Or were they seeking his words of congratulation on a job well done? I tend to think they assumed they had done the right thing and they wanted to show Jesus what good disciples they were. I say that because just a few verses before this the disciples were arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest.

Jesus points out the obvious. This stranger is casting out demons! He is banishing evil from people's lives. If he is using Jesus' name effectively, then he must believe. If he ain't agin us, he's fur us. If he's not "them" then he is "us."

In the same way Christians today need to be careful when they are choosing up sides. We don't want to fall into the trap that the disciples did. They condemned a perfectly good coworker to make themselves look good. Don't we do that sometimes? If they do as little as give us a cup of cold water because we serve Christ, they are blessed. We need to remind ourselves that if they are serving the Lord, then we are on the same side.

So does anything go? No! Jesus' comments that follow make that clear. Jesus says some hard things about stumbling blocks and millstones and cutting off hands and cutting out eyes, and hellfire. We're talking about heaven and hell; serious quality of life, and after life issues! If someone is preventing people from growing in Christ, they need to be stopped if only for their own good. Telling people that they can live however they want and still serve Christ is leading them astray. Sometimes people need to cut something out of their lives to be faithful. If they don't they will suffer in this world and possibly in the next.

We need to take stands on what is right and wrong. The church needs to stand up and say that certain lifestyles are wrong: drugs, and extramarital relations and materialism and addictions are damaging and need to be cut off. The church needs to take a stand for equal treatment for woman and we need to live it out by treating them equally in the church. The church needs to take a stand on racial issues. It is still true that the church hour on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in our society. We need to take a stand on issues of social justice and economic justice. And we may find ourselves at odds with other Christians.

There is something that Jesus says at the end of this passage that has a bearing on all this. He said, "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?" Salt is a compound. So as long as it is salt, it has its flavor. If it were to undergo a chemical reaction it would lose its saltiness, but then it would no longer be salt. In that case you could not say that the salt lost its flavor. You would say the salt became something else: a different compound. However, salt can become contaminated. It can become mixed with something else that dilutes it and ruins its usefulness. In the same way Christian's lives can become contaminated and as a result ineffective.

So we need to have standards and live by them. Heaven and Hell are hanging in the balance. We need to retain our flavor as the salt of the earth.

This brings us to the last thing Jesus says on this issue. He says, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." First of all, we don't want to fall into the trap of condemning a coworker. Secondly, we do need to maintain standards. But at the same time we need to be at peace with our brothers and sisters. Jesus says, "have salt in yourselves." Start by looking at yourself. The disciples' salt was contaminated by pride. They thought they were better than this other guy because they had attended the right seminars and he hadn't. And once we have checked our own saltiness, we can be at peace with other Christians.

I feel like I am preaching to the choir here at Aldersgate. As I look around this congregation, we are truly a mix. We have liberals and evangelicals. We have conservatives and moderates. We have contemporary and traditional and liturgical. We even have Catholics and Protestants. We even have all that in the same Sunday School classes. And I have seen us disagree and argue, but still be at peace with one another.

That is what church should do. We need to take stands. But we also need to check our own salt and the purity of our motivations and disagree in peace.

But it all goes back to the beginning. Remember? There was this guy casting out demons. There are a lot of demons out there. There are demons of alcoholism and drugs and suicide and depression and infidelity and abuse and injustice and the list goes on. We need to be casting them out! People's lives are in jeopardy.

There are a lot of demons out there. We need all the help we can get casting them out. That is the bottom line people. It's not the Methodist versus the Baptist or Catholic or liberals or evangelicals or whatever. It's not US against THEM. It's Jesus against evil.

If they are not against us, they are for us. We need to have standards; we need to have salt in ourselves, but we also need to be at peace with our brother and sisters; our fellow servants in the struggle.