

## All in Favor...Start *Acting* That Way!

[Text - Mark 9:38-42]

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In this morning's New Testament reading, the disciple John is really ticked-off to see someone "outside" the circle of Jesus' followers casting out demons in Jesus' name. In John's view, this person just doesn't have the proper credentials - he doesn't fit the criteria for a *True Believer*. So John, probably with a deep sense of pride, tells Jesus, "We tried to stop him!" Apparently, John and the other disciples feel a great need to defend the good name of Jesus. However, Jesus sees this as completely unnecessary, *and* counter-productive! He essentially says to them, "Guys, back-off! If someone's doing something good - like freeing a person from a demonic oppression; or even doing something as simple as giving someone a cup of water because they're thirsty - that's cause for *celebration*, not condemnation! And it really doesn't matter what religious name that person is using; because whoever is not against us, is for us!"

"Whoever is not against us, is for us!" Those 8 little words, may be the most refreshing and freeing words that Jesus ever spoke. They are wonderful words of reconciliation, and *invitation*! Words that invite *all* people, regardless of their faith - or lack of faith - to come together for the common good. Words that invite people of the *Christian* faith to lighten-up, and to appreciate the faith which is at work in the lives of others. And most importantly, these words invite you and me to consider - and to claim - what we are *for*, rather than concentrate and complain about what we're *against*. "Whoever is not against us is for us!"

Today's reading definitely reminds us of the unity which Jesus Christ desires to bring. Yet it also reminds us that genuine unity has yet to be achieved - not within Christ's Church, and certainly not within our world. This continuing divisiveness and disunity can definitely lead to a sense of disappointment and discouragement. And while I could rant and rave *against* "those people" who resist the compassionate,

inclusive way of Christ, to do so would be to miss Jesus' point! Rather than raising a litany of lament about what I'm *against*, I should keep my focus on what I'm *for*! I should be amazed at how far the Church, and our society, has actually come in my lifetime. And I can certainly rejoice in the fact that you and I - in *Brecksville Ohio* - are members of a congregation that, for decades, has intentionally welcomed and included people who are often shunned and excluded! I can remember, and be encouraged by, those marvelous words of Jesus: "Whoever is not against us is for us!"

As we in the Church continue to open-up to this tremendous truth, we will begin to appreciate the phenomenal number of sisters and brothers that we have throughout the world - people of *all faiths*! And in the political realm, the impact of Jesus' words could have a tremendously positive effective. I think it's fair to say that the vast majority of Americans agree that we have some serious problems with issues of immigration, health care, economic and social injustice, the increase of gun violence, and the decrease of governmental effectiveness. Therefore, it's reasonable to conclude that we are *for* addressing these problems in a deliberate and constructive manner. And though we may not all agree on the best way to tackle these issues, the crucial thing is that we work together to do so; that we stop treating one another as enemies, but rather as allies with a shared desire for the common good. It seems to me that Jesus' teaching and technique can be particularly beneficial in this regard.

It can be extremely helpful and empowering when people express what they're *for*, rather than constantly complaining about what they're *against*. Because if you can tell me what you are for, rather than what you're against, I'll probably be more likely to listen, understand, and try to appreciate your point of view. And when I can focus on what I am *for*, instead of all the negative stuff, it will impact the way I approach my life - and live-out my faith. It will probably help other people hear what I have to say, and possibly even work with me in addressing some of Life's challenging issues. [And as many of you know, I need all the help I can get!]

For example, when I try to fight *against* injustice, it simply wears me out. Injustice is an immense and overwhelming demon, that crushes the human spirit. But when you and I work together *for* justice, then positive things will begin to happen. We can help people overcome prejudice and oppression; or we can do something as simple as giving a cold drink and a hot meal to someone in need. When I try to fight *against* intolerance, I often find myself *becoming* intolerant, ineffective, and extremely frustrated. But when you and I work together *for* this community of openness, inclusion and affirmation, it energizes us all to reach-out to others with welcome, compassion, and grace. It becomes a *Sign* that we take to heart Jesus's call to "love our neighbor, as we love ourselves."

The disciple John does what many other followers of Jesus have tried to do throughout the Church's history. He tries to exclude someone from the Family of Faith because they don't "pass the test". They're "outsiders" who lack a correct theological understanding. They're "offensive" because they use the right religious language, or love the right-gendered people, or display the correct "Christian" characteristics. Yet Jesus says that there's only one genuine characteristic that identifies those who follow him. "By *this* all people will know that you are my followers", Jesus says, "that you love one another." Love One Another. That's it. That's everything! The one true sign that a person is "for" Jesus Christ, is in the way that person treats others - with compassion, openness and love. And this makes perfect sense; because the one true sign that Jesus Christ is *for* us all, is by the way in which he *treats* us all - with compassion, openness and love.

Jesus chooses to live among, and for, all kinds of people. He breaks bread with the “sinners and tax-collectors”, showing them Divine welcome and grace. He also breaks bread with the stuffy self-righteous, calling them to open-up and recognize that they, too, need Divine mercy and grace. Jesus Christ lives for *all* people; and Jesus Christ dies defending the Divine dignity and inclusion of all people. And he is far more concerned about practical human relationships, than about human religious practices. He’s more interested in positive actions, than in personal accolades. Jesus delights *whenever* the power of Divine Light and Love overcomes the forces of fear, hatred, and oppression - regardless of who gets the credit! In all that he says and in all that he does, Jesus Christ confirms his belief that “Whoever is not against us is for us!” Today, Jesus asks you and me to not only *believe* this, but to actually start *acting* as if it were true!