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 September 30, 2018

Whoever is not for us is against us?  
 Mark 9:38-50

Seventeen years ago, President George W. Bush stood before Congress and outlined his plan to seek justice and retaliation in the wake of 9/11. I was a junior in college, shaken and dismayed as the world fell apart and then rapidly reorganized around me. A Religion and Political Science major, I remember being surprised to hear him invoke religious language and even scripture in his speeches at that time. He drew sharp lines between good and evil, and used the phrase “wonder-working power” – not in the blood of the Lamb like the old gospel song goes, but in the goodness of the American people.<sup>1</sup> At the time, I thought it was a strange choice of words, somewhat cloaked rhetoric. Politicians often do this – use familiar biblical phrases to speak to their base and garner support for their cause. The one that was most provoking to me, though, was a riff on the passage we just heard. The President said, “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Neutrality was not an option. Then Senator from New York Hilary Clinton echoed his sentiment – “You are either with America in our time of need or you are not,” she said. And another time: “Every nation has to either be with us or against us.”

As the dust settled in Manhattan and the grief and shock, the fear and fury set in across the country, our leaders on both sides of the aisle made it clear: you can be either with us or against us. There is no middle ground, no grey area. There is good or evil; our side, or the terrorists’ side. Us or them.

I understand why stark lines needed to be drawn on the world’s stage at that time. But the ferocious partisanship that grips our government – the partisanship that played out so painfully with the hearings this week - seems to stem from the same mindset – you are either with us, or you’re against us. There is no middle ground.

From early on in our lives, we are urged to choose. To be this, not that. To affiliate ourselves with a team, a school, a church, a best friend. To pick sides. Are you a winner or a loser? Naughty or nice? Bad or good? Sinner or saint? Are you For us or Against us?

And that’s what Jesus says too... or is it?

When the disciples complain about a guy who is casting out demons in Jesus’s name, but is unknown to them and doesn’t follow them, Jesus says – let him. Whoever is not against us is for us.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Jesus Factor: Invoking God and Faith,” Frontline PBS.  
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/president/invoking.html>

That's almost what the politicians said, ...but not quite. When you think about it, what Jesus said may actually be the opposite. At the very least, it's a much more expansive view of the world. When the disciples complain to Jesus, Jesus says, "so what if that guy is practicing Christianity without a license?<sup>2</sup> So what if he hasn't affiliated as an official disciple? If he's opposing evil in the world by casting out demons in my name... if God's power is available to him to heal and to save – then why stop him?"

Revolutionary. It is possible to further the kingdom of God, to be on the side of justice and love and peace and goodness *no matter what team you're on?! Whether you've affiliated with a ragtag gang of disciples or not? No matter on which side of the aisle you sit?*

Depending on who you are, this news could be a bit unnerving. It opens up a lot of grey area. How do we know who is on our side? How do we know who to trust? How do we know who can be believed?

I think we can take some guidance from this scripture. First, Jesus tells the disciples to be supportive of folks who are trying to do the right thing, those who oppose evil in the world. His disciples should be careful not to cause others to stumble, even if they aren't officially a part of their group.

Then Jesus gives some pretty strange advice - advice about mutilating body parts that cause us to sin, else we wind up in hell.

Here's an interesting textual note. The word translated "hell" here is actually the name Gehenna – which was a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem where fires smoldered day and night. Anyone who's ever smelled trash burning knows it can smell pretty hellish. But he's not referring to an afterlife here. I could give you a primer on theologies of hell, but I think that would make a much more interesting small group discussion, so let me know if you want to get together and talk about that sometime.

There is a tradition in Guatemala called the Quema del Diablo – the burning of the devil. On December 7, families take all of the trash from their houses that has accumulated over the year, and they make a bonfire in the street in front of their front door. They put an effigy of the devil on top of the pile, and at 6 PM, they set it all on fire. I remember the smoke hanging low over the valley where I lived for days afterward. The trash symbolizes whatever mess in your life you need to clean up, whatever wrong you've done in the year. By burning it, families can put evil and wrongdoing out of their lives, and start preparing for the celebrations of Christmas with a blank slate.

What I take from his talk about cutting off hands and feet if they cause you to stumble is that Jesus takes sin seriously, and we should, too.

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<sup>2</sup> This was Shannon Webster's sermon title when he preached this passage in 2015.

What I hear is an invitation to look within and ask – does anything I do prevent the flourishing of others? Have I ever caused someone else to stumble? Whatever it is, I must stop doing it! Repent of it!

Ana Maria Archila, a sexual assault survivor, confronted Senator Jeff Flake on Friday as he made his way back to the hearing room.<sup>3</sup> She and another woman blocked the elevator to talk with him, and their anger, their pain were palpable. She said that the work of justice is to recognize hurt, to acknowledge or take responsibility for the pain you've caused, and to begin to repair it. Recognize, acknowledge, and repair.

The work of justice is not an easy road. The work of justice means not ignoring, or shaming; not belittling, or blaming. Not doubting, nor denying, nor refusing to see or hear. But recognizing where harm has been done, acknowledging it or taking responsibility, and beginning to repair.

Jesus then says, “Everyone will be salted with fire.” I don't know what it means to be salted with fire. But perhaps it means that all of us – every single one of us – struggles with sin. Everyone has caused another pain or hurt another at some point. Each of us has something to acknowledge and repent, so that healing can begin. So that repair may begin. Because we all live in the grey area. No matter which side we are on, not one of us is perfect. And we all are in need of God's grace. Thank goodness God loves us not because we are good but because God is good.

A colleague once served a small church in the Midwest that had a big communion table. The table at that church was big because it needed to be. See there was a family in that church, where the father caused a lot of pain and suffering. He abused his wife and children, and when they finally got the courage to leave and press charges, they all kept coming to church. The judge who sentenced him to prison was a member of the congregation, too, the judge sat across the aisle from the man in worship and when they came down the aisle to take communion, they walked side by side. That table was big enough, the grace it offered real enough that despite their pain, and the needless untold suffering, and their anger, they all managed to find a place there.

My theology professor Shelly Rambo studies theology and trauma. She looks at how we make sense of the evil in the world – what we believe about where God is in the midst of traumatic events, and how we wrestle with the ideas of forgiveness or reconciliation or redemption in the aftermath of trauma. She says, it is hard, so hard to be a human being in the world! We all bear scars too real to hide, pain too deep to undo. Sometimes, when we try to tell the truth, words fall short under the weight of the burdens we carry.

But look around. Look at the windows that families bought for our church a lifetime ago so that even when the world is ugly, and awful, we would have a place to come to be

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<sup>3</sup> Chokshi, Niraj and Astead Herndon, “Jeff Flake is Confronted on Video by Sexual Assault Survivors” New York Times, Friday, 9/28/18, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/us/politics/jeff-flake-protesters-kavanaugh.html>

reminded that God throughout history has stood on the side of love and opposed evil. To be reminded that no matter what, God is beautiful and good, and that you are God's precious and beloved child.

This week has been “raw and draining, even by the standards of a raw and draining era” as one journalist put it.<sup>4</sup> If you are a survivor of assault, if you have been a friend or a counselor or a teacher or otherwise cared for someone who has been through the trauma of assault, then this week has likely opened wounds in your heart or psyche that were hidden or healed long ago. I am so sorry. As I struggled to make sense of what was playing out on the national stage, I gave thanks for you all.

Look to your left, and look to your right. Look behind and in front of you. We are in this together. God does not abandon us in the midst of our pain and our suffering. God gives us to one another, to listen as we tell the truth of our lives. To hear one another into speaking. To bind up the broken places. To offer support. Not to dismiss or shame, not to belittle or blame, not to deny or ignore. To recognize. To acknowledge the pain we may have caused or the wrong we may have done, and to begin to work to repair it.

Knowing that whoever is not against us is for us – helps me have a more expansive, more loving view of the world. Knowing that no matter what side we are on, each one of us has some part which needs to be acknowledged, cut out, and thrown onto the burning trash heap is somehow strangely comforting. Because that table – it looks small. But it is big enough for all of us. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>4</sup> Poniewozik, James, “A High-Stakes Hearing Raises Two Voices, One Quiet, One Loud.” Critic’s Notebook, New York Times, 9/27/18.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/27/arts/television/brett-kavanaugh-hearing-television.html>