

## Whoever Is Not Against Us Is For Us

September 30, 2018

John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. (Mark 9:38-41)

We have not crossed the threshold yet, at least not in the sense of most churches and most of the prominent church leaders siding with and enabling an autocrat doing irreparable harm to our democratic republic. Politically speaking, I do not think we have arrived at that point yet. But there is enough complicity already that it is not too soon for us as Christians to start asking ourselves what the threshold is. As Christians we profess one baptism and one lord, one faith in the God made known to us as Jesus Christ. And from the earliest days of the Christian movement there has been both diversity and division. The early decades and centuries of Christianity are indeed more diverse than unified. But diversity and division are two separate things. Keeping this in mind seems to be a central teaching in this week’s lesson.

Diversity does not entail division. In fact, for most of us who know enough about the value of different perspectives, who have been blessed with friendships and perhaps family that cut across the dividing lines of race or religion or sexual orientation, we know that diversity more often than not becomes a kind of antidote to division, something that brings more cohesion and common cause than some kind of disintegration. Embracing and celebrating our differences more often than not strengthens our unity and sense of belonging, endows our lives as individuals within a richer network of human wisdom and experience. It is the sad experience of people who have not yet been blessed with such enriching experiences that they are confined to a limiting perspective that sees diversity—diverse viewpoints, diverse people and experiences, a diversity of concerns that need to be addressed—as a threat. It is sad to see a sys gender male become anxious or feel threatened in the presence of a trans-person sitting next to him on the bus. It ought to arouse our empathy to see a white person, who perhaps has had a rough life of her own, bristle at any mention of the idea of white-privilege, not knowing enough of what the words mean and the reality those words express to know that it is not about her or whether her life has been hard or easy. Living in a country plagued by white supremacy, none of us Christians committed to the truth and called to promote love and justice, none of us should mistake the call for more racial equity in our criminal justice system as something threatening or as being anti-law enforcement. To do so is irresponsible and below who we are called to be as disciples of Christ.

This week’s scripture, the first lines of our passage this week, call us to broaden our outlooks. God is at work in the world in ways that are beyond our perception and control. If someone does good in Jesus’ name, it will not be possible for them to remain separate from Christ and Christ’s community. It is not, in this passage a matter of anything goes. This is to say the openness that Jesus teaches his disciples, them in the text and us in the pews today, is not to accept everyone who uses the name Christian as Christian. It is more qualified than that. Jesus’

instructs us to anticipate that such a one doing good, not simply shouting “Jesus this and Jesus that”, but exorcising demons in the powerful name of Jesus cannot remain separate or at odds with his mission. Diversity is a welcome gift. One that reminds us to be humble in our judgement of others and other Christians and their practices. But diversity need not mean division or divisiveness.

In our politically polarized country there are good Christians who are Republican and there are good Christians who are Democrats. There are good Christians who are Roman Catholic and there are good Christians who are Southern Baptist. But I am starting to wonder where the line is, not so much in terms of one denomination or voting record or party affiliation, but in terms of the truth and the undermining the very foundation of a democratic society. How is possible for a truth-telling woman to recount her sexual assault, to give brave and compelling and believable testimony, and for any Christians committed to truth and respecting the dignity of every human creature, not to see that testimony as disqualifying, pending further information, for her attacker to be promoted to a life-time appointment on the supreme court. How is it possible for someone like Franklin Graham to be such an ardent supporter of a President who brags about himself being a sexual predator. There are lots of things we might say here, and I can appreciate that this has already struck a nerve with some of us. But let me say more directly what I am interested in here: how is it possible for such a prominent Christian leader like Graham to dismiss lying and theft and assault as a “New York City style” and for the rest of us to accept this as still within the bounds of truth and the coherence of a Christian identity? As Christians this is a question we need to ask. To pretend that this doesn’t tear the very fabric of our shared understanding of what words mean is a denial of truth, a sin that needs to be recognized as such. We are not there yet, when Christianity itself in the popular culture has become so complicit in a worldly order that stands in direct opposition to God’s love and justice, but it is not too soon to be thinking about where we want to stand in this evolving national situation.

And while Democracy is not itself inherently Christian, let’s be clear that according to the standards of our faith, according to our Reformed tradition and values, if we are indeed on a path leading to the restriction and collapse of this democracy, this would be a development at odds with the faith we profess. The silencing of minority opinions, or should we pull the whole band-aid off all at once and just say the silencing of minorities—through red-lining, the school to prison pipeline and the widespread disenfranchisement of millions of people based solely on the color of their skin— this is a step in the wrong direction. The deterioration of a government with three separate and independent branches of government that check the power of each into a leaky and corrupt government that runs around seeking to please one morally debased and medically unstable leader, this direction we continue to move in, if it were to continue, would be a set back from the perspective of our faith. A republic where overt and fomenting partisan jurists are seated to secure a fraudulent majority on the highest court in the land, just in time for the impeachment trial that is coming, that would be against the values of our faith.

A commitment to truth. A commitment to justice. A commitment to accountability. A commitment to women as equal in all things to men, except perhaps in the proclivity toward corruption and sexual assault, these are values of our faith. Can you imagine if she was the one being considered for the promotion and he gave the testimony she gave, and then she offered a

response by screaming as he did at elected representatives of the people who are just doing their job by asking legitimate questions? Can you imagine that there'd still be any question about whether it was possible to support such a nomination with integrity? If you are among those who still think this is a tough decision, could you imagine if you were in her shoes, or if that was your daughter or son, your adopted child or grandson, your mom or your dad giving the testimony of being assaulted by him instead? To support him one has to dismiss her as a liar or confused or adopt some other completely demeaning and unreasonable position. Or one has to say that sexual assault isn't that big of a deal, that the experiences of one and three women and one and six men is not consequential. I wonder how many of his supporters would volunteer to be assaulted by him? Perhaps, they would prefer not to be assaulted by him, but if happened and maybe if enough time had passed, that he could still count on their support.

This has been a terrible week. A week that should not have gone the way that it did. A week in which difficult truth came to the foreground and required responsible people to confront difficult issues. But the week was made so much more difficult by the fact that so many people proved to be so disappointing. That in their frustration and pain about the political consequences of the truth, so many people were willing to side against truth. That in their hyper-partisan world outlook so many people could actually try to argue and maintain that even though they believe her, they want to confirm him anyway because of the timing of the things was politically suspicious. As if timing and political maneuvering could itself erase the reality of the assault.

There is no political party that aligns with Christian faith, that should be promoted as being Christian, whose views are inherently better than all of the alternatives because of how well it aligns with Christian faith. We all know that we do not have a choice about whether or not to be political as Christians. Our baptism decided that for us already. To follow Christ is to be political, to be active and engaged in the political world. But what we get to decide, what we must always and continually decide, is how to be political, where to stand and with whom. And while there has never been and never will be a political party that is reflective of and encompassing of Christian faith and values, there have been a number of political movements and parties throughout history that have proven themselves to be irreconcilable with Christianity. We are not there yet, but it is not too soon to be asking who it is that stands against Christ? Faith requires commitment and has consequences. It changes our lives or else it is something less than faith in Christ. Whoever is not against us is for us. But what do we do, or perhaps when do we know, when others prove to be against us. How do we love as Christians without in the process surrendering the truth that love demands of us?

May God continue to guide and hold us in these challenging days.

Rev. Jason M. Donnelly, Ph.D.  
Pastor, Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC  
Boston, Massachusetts