

Don't Trip Over Your Ego Trip

[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 tremendous need to defend the good name of Jesus. However, Jesus sees this as completely unnecessary, *and* counter-productive! He essentially says to them, "Dudes, chill-out! If someone's doing something good - like freeing a person from a terrible oppression; or even doing something as simple as giving a cup of water to someone who is 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 eight little words, may be the most refreshing and freeing words that Jesus ever spoke. They're words of unification and *invitation!* Words that invite *all* people, regardless of their faith - or *absence* of faith - to come together for the common good. Words that challenge people of the *Christian* faith to lighten-up, and to appreciate the positive efforts of others. And most importantly, these words invite you and me to think about - and to claim - what we are *for*, rather than focus on and complain about what we're *against*. "Whoever is not against us is for us!"

Today's reading reminds us of the unity that Jesus Christ desires to bring. Yet it also reminds us that genuine unity has yet to be achieved - not within the Church, and certainly not within the world. And while this divisiveness and discord can lead to a sense of discouragement, for me to rant and rave *against* "those people" who resist the compassionate way of Christ, would be to miss the point! Rather than raising a litany of lament about what I'm *against*, I need to keep my focus on what I am *for!* I should be grateful at how far the Church, and our society, has actually come in my own lifetime. I can certainly celebrate in the fact that you and I are members of a congregation that, for decades, has intentionally welcomed and included people who are often shunned and excluded! And I can be encouraged by

those marvelous words of Jesus: “Whoever is not against us is for us!”

When people in the Church 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* faith traditions. And in the political realm, the impact of Jesus’ words could have a tremendously positive effect. I think it’s fair to say that the majority of Americans agree that we have some serious problems with issues of gun violence, immigration reform, health care, social and economic inequality, and a lack of governmental effectiveness. Therefore, it’s reasonable to conclude that most of us are *for* addressing these problems. And though we may not 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 potential allies with a shared desire for the common good. It seems to me that Jesus’ teaching can be helpful in this regard.

It is both beneficial and empowering when people express what they are *for*, rather than constantly complaining about what they’re *against*. Because if you can tell me what you are for, I’ll be more likely to listen, and try to understand 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 may help others hear what I have to say; and they may help me understand things from a different perspective. [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 soul and immobilizes the spirit. But when you and I work together *for* justice, then positive things can begin to happen. We can challenge and help change unfair laws or oppressive practices; 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 to reach-out to others with welcome, compassion, and grace.

The disciple John does what many 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 the correct theological understanding. They're "offensive" because they don't use the right religious language, or they love the wrong-gender person. They just don't display the correct characteristics of a "true Christian". 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* all people, is by the way in which he *treats* all people - with compassion, openness and love.

Jesus associates with all kinds of people. He breaks bread with "sinners and tax-collectors", offering them a warm welcome and a Divine graciousness. He also breaks bread with stuffy, self-righteous religious leaders, calling them to open-up and to recognize that they, too, need Divine mercy and grace. Jesus Christ lives for *all* people; and Jesus Christ dies for 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 acclaim. He rejoices *whenever* the power of Divine Light and Love overcomes the forces of fear, hatred, and oppression - regardless of who gets the credit! For Jesus, it's not about personal ego; it's about raising-up the good in *every* person he encounters. And that's how it should be for you and me!