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 Mark 9:38-41
 Hudson
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INTRODUCTION: Of all the teachings Jesus has given us, which is the most difficult to follow?

- Love your enemies
- Turn the other cheek
- The first shall be last
- Sell everything you have, give it to the poor & follow me.
- Forgive seventy times seven

All those are hard, but I think what Jesus says in today's passage is even harder.

SCRIPTURE: *John said to him, "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.*

SERMON:

Whoever is not against us is for us.

What do you think? Is that setting the bar high? Or is it setting it low?

It seems pretty low at first glance. Anything goes if it's not against us. As long as you don't do anything to hurt us, it's okay. That's a pretty low bar.

Or maybe it's really high. Do you think it could be a testament against human nature? Maybe it's a statement about how unaccepting we are. Maybe it's not about the actions of those who may or may not hurt us but about the way *we* behave towards them.

Think of it. Here we have these first followers of Jesus. A bunch of no-name men. No real credentials. But now they're on the inside. And they want to be careful about who else gets in.

They say, They're doing things in your name Jesus.

But they didn't get clearance from us first.

They say, And they're not doing it our way and following our rules ~ they're playing outside the game.

Do you think Jesus was actually setting a very high bar for us on how we view each other? *If they're not doing harm, Jesus said, if they're not doing harm, encourage them – and maybe they'll even do good. And not doing harm is a whole lot better than a lot of people do a lot of the time.*

Whoever is not against us is for us.

That doesn't sound so hard. But it is. I see it all the time. Somebody comes up with a new and creative idea. And what do we do?

- Say "good job"?
- Say "that's an interesting idea"?
- Say "how can we help"?

No, far more often we find the faults, all the holes, all the reasons it won't work.

- Maybe we think there's a better way – but at least they're trying something.
- Maybe we don't trust them, because they have a tainted history – but so do we.
- Maybe we think they should have asked our advice – but did we ever ask theirs?

Sometimes we get so busy tearing apart an idea that we never get a chance to see the good in it.

In Tom Rath's best seller, How Full Is Your Bucket, he shared a study of 1000 American POWs from the Korean War where there was a much higher death rate of POWs than any other American war. The strange thing was that there was less cruel punishment than typically found among detention camps; they even had adequate food, water and shelter. Still, 38% died, primarily attributed to the extremely negative emotional climate the North Koreans created among the POWs – they made them feel bad about themselves.

Translating this study into the work place and everyday life, Rath says, *Where productivity is concerned, it would be better for organizations if people who are overly negative stayed home.* (pp. 27-31) Even productive, hard workers who are overly critical of others do more damage than good – better that they not even show up. Studies show the same in family life – overly negative critical family members can literally take years off the lives of the rest of their family.

Jesus says, *Whoever is not against us is for us.* He says we should stop making everybody fit into our mold, into our narrow definition of the acceptable. Stop spending all your time critiquing them. Stop finding reasons to shut people and their efforts out and (instead) find reasons to embrace them and support their efforts for good. And that's not always easy. It takes more than just loving them in some sort of paternalistic way. It means believing in them and letting them lead. It means letting go of control and letting others have power. And that's hard.

Whoever is not against us is for us. That's a pretty high bar to get over.

Late one evening about ten years ago, Joe Lobner told me he'd like to start a Saturday morning men's group at the church. Now Joe was a good guy, but his theology wasn't at the center of the church I was serving, his taking to a more literal reading of scripture had caused a few run-ins over the years. Well, when Joe told me his idea for a Saturday morning men's group I could see he was downright giddy with excitement about the idea.

So what was the first thing I said?

You're not going to get anybody on Saturday mornings . . . maybe we should think of another time.

We talked for another half hour, but the discussion had ended with my first comment. His energy was gone and so was Joe and his family. They left the church less than six months later. Why? Because I failed to see the good in his idea *first*.

As I have thought back on that encounter many, many times over the years, I've wondered over my motivation. I began by thinking I was right to point out the challenge. *We do* need to think ideas through clearly if they're going to have any real hope of succeeding. But I know better than that. My motivations weren't so noble. I didn't want to lose my early Saturday mornings with my kids and I was suspicious of the direction he would take the group if I wasn't able to watch over it closely. So instead of beginning with praise and support and asking how I could help in the effort, I told him the problem with his idea *first*.

Do you ever do that? Like Jesus' disciples, are you ever a naysayer? Maybe not literally – and sometimes in such subtle ways you'd be hard pressed to see it – but . . . Do you ever find yourself squashing peoples' efforts, their ideas, their sense of self and worth because their efforts don't meet your idea of how it should look? Or you don't like the person or the person's history? Or because of past grievances we have with the person or people? Or . . . well, you fill in the blank as to the why. And we keep them out and shut them down.

But Jesus set the bar a whole lot higher than that. He said:

Whoever is not against us is for us.

Jesus didn't spend much time on who or what we should reject. Almost all his efforts were on who or what we should include. It's like the parable of the wheat and the weeds – let it all grow and maybe some good will come of it and God will sort it out later.

Whoever is not against us is for us.

A fundamental tenet of the Christian faith says we are all – as people and even our efforts and ideas – that we are all broken and sinful. That's not my idea – that's age old orthodox Christian belief. But our passage this morning turns that idea on its head. It says: despite whatever is broken about us, we still have so much to offer, so much good to contribute, so much blessing to give back. And that's the real word of hope and promise found in the high bar of this morning's gospel. If only we encourage the good within each one instead of becoming obsessed with the bad and the ill. If only we can see past the challenges and find the potential, like seeing the little child who can't sit still in his seat, or the little girl who can't get along with her classmates, and grab hold of the promise of who that child might become – that's when hope becomes reality. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but when we remain steadfast in our belief and support of that which is good and might just be, in time, it will be so.

That's a big part of what this table says. It says God takes us as we are – broken as we may be. And God makes more of us than we could ever hope to be on our own. Just imagine what would happen if we did that with each other.

Whoever is not against us, is for us – I like that.