

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 27, 2015

James 5:13-20 ~ Mark 9:38-50

"US AGAINST THEM"

By Mary Anne Biggs

A mountain climber was traversing a perilous cliff when he heard a panicked shout. It seems another climber had become trapped in a cleft down below, and needed someone to rescue him. "Just a minute," said his rescuer, "I'll throw you a rope." "Thank the Lord you came along," came the reply. "Oh, you're a Christian?" the rescuer said, throwing him the rope. "That's great, so am I! Catholic or Protestant?" "Protestant!" he answered, tying the rope round his waist. "That's great, so am I!" said the rescuer, as he began to pull the man up the slope. "Methodist or Baptist?" "Baptist," the fellow answered. "That's great, so am I! General Baptist or Particular Baptist?" "Particular Baptist," he answered. "That's great, so am I! Particular Baptist Eastern Confession or Particular Baptist Western Confession?" "Western Confession," the fellow answered as he got near the top. "That's great, so am I! Particular Baptist Western Confession Reform of '87 or Particular Baptist Western Confession Reform of '95?" "Reform of '95," he answered. "Die, you heretic scum!" said the rescuer, and he let go of the rope.

Long ago Mark Twain observed, *"There are only two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who don't."* Seems to me we have a lot more of the first kind these days than we used to. Everywhere you turn people are divided into "us" against "them." Watch the news ... read the papers ... listen to the radio ... especially during this time of political debates. But I would suggest that "debate" is not what's actually happening. The dominant theme is "it's us against them." And the rules are clear. We are right and they are wrong. We are good and they are bad. We are smart and they are stupid. We are loving and they are hateful. We are beloved of God and they are going to hell, and we're glad about that, too.

"The heresy of fundamentalism," said one scholar, "is in its `tyranny of limited alternatives.'" That is, it narrows everything down into only two choices in a "my way or the highway" theology. Since its birth on the American scene as a reaction to Modernism, Fundamentalism has always thrived on having a clear enemy to attack. If it lacks an enemy, it loses steam. But it always finds an enemy. For instance, Mel White, who was a ghost writer for several fundamentalist television evangelists in the seventies and eighties, insists that when the Berlin Wall fell and Communism was no longer a threat ... abortion and homosexuality were intentionally chosen as the next "enemies" to attack ... thereby drawing upon the anxieties and appealing to the pocketbooks of their constituency. These two

complex issues were simplified into absolute evils and demonized. And it worked, and the beat goes on.

The Fundamentalists have a right to their own point of view. What troubles me is how much our whole society has bought into this kind of simplistic "us against them," ... "only two choices" thinking. Do you realize how many people decide that since they aren't a Fundamentalist, they can't be a Christian, as if there were no other alternative? There seems to be no genuine dialogue taking place in our society these days. We are increasingly polarized into ethnic, political, and religious camps, standing behind our stone walls hurling insults at those who are not like us. Perhaps this competitive division is not new, but it seems to me that the rhetoric has become more heated and violence more glorified as a way of resolving conflict. It is a dangerous situation precisely because we have divided the whole world ... and now even our own society ... into "us against them."

Jesus had a different approach. The disciples came to him one day and complained, *"We saw somebody casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn't one of us."* They didn't understand that we have the copyright, the patent, the legal title to your name.

Jesus must have felt the irony of the situation. It was exactly the same charge that the religious powers had leveled at him. He wasn't educated ... just a carpenter's

son who lacked official approval - all of which was to say, he wasn't one of them, and that they couldn't control him. Jesus told the disciples to leave the man be. He said, *"Whoever is not against us is for us."*

*"Whoever is not against us **for us**"* - just the opposite of what we usually hear.

Usually leaders of movements say "whoever is not for us is **against** us" ... as a way of holding tight control by creating an "us against them environment." But Jesus said "Whoever is not against us is **for** us," which is amazing when you consider his situation at the time. First of all, he recognizes that we do have enemies. We do have people who are against us. If we think we can stand for what is right in the world and seek to proclaim a gospel that God loves everybody equally ... over and against the political and economic and social and religious hierarchies of the world ... and not be opposed by those who stand to profit from injustice, oppression, and evil, we are mistaken. We are naive. Jesus never told his disciples that they would have no enemies. *"They will put you out of the congregation,"* he told them. *"Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think by doing so they are offering a worship to God"* (John 16:2). But we should take heart from those words, because when people you don't even know categorize you and label you and demonize you and slander you and seek to ostracize you from the rest of the community or denomination or nation, you might just be on to something right. You have certainly touched a nerve. But it's nothing

new in the history of faith. *"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account"* Jesus said.

"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).

The Bible never says we won't have enemies. But it does promise God's presence with us. *"In this world you will face persecution,"* Jesus told his disciples. *"But take courage; I have conquered the world!"* (John 16:33).

On the other hand, the Bible doesn't tell us to make enemies of everybody we can.

We have to be careful in situations of conflict not to become reactive and adolescent, by being perverse simply to shock others and to assert our freedom.

We can assert our freedom with integrity ... act out of our center ... in ways consistent with our values. You see, the Bible also holds us responsible for how we respond to those who come against us.

That's the other thing that amazes me about Jesus saying "Whoever is not against us is **for** us." He transcends the conflict to see the universal connection we share as beloved of God. Jesus lived in a highly polarized day, too. The Pharisees hated the Sadducees, the Zealots hated the Herodians, the Jews hated the Romans. Jesus came along accepting them all and confronting them all, and they all tried to attack him. Yet, somehow, if the gospel traditions are correct, Jesus ended up having

personal friends and followers who were Pharisees and Sadducees and Zealots and Herodians and Jews and Romans. He didn't categorize people and judge them as a class ... and even in a hostile and dangerous situation ... he did not become paranoid and controlling, rebellious and perverse ... insisting that only his closest followers could be his friends. Hated by his enemies, he refused to hate them. Crucified by his opponents in the ultimate demonstration of their power, he responded with the ultimate demonstration of his power ... he forgave them. Do you realize how remarkable and unusual that is in all of human history?

Will Campbell, a Mississippi preacher, was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement in the South. But in 1969, the night before Bob Jones, the Grand dragon of the North Carolina KKK was to enter a federal penitentiary for refusing to surrender Klan membership lists to a Congressional *subpoena*, Campbell went to the Dragon's den, as Lawrence Wright puts it, "to celebrate communion with a bottle of bourbon." Indeed, Campbell helped Klan families get their kids scholarships to college and visited with James Earl Ray in prison. Remember now that Ray was the convicted assassin of his friend, Martin Luther King. This outreach to racists infuriated some of his friends in the movement. But he didn't associate with the Klan in order to affirm their racism ... rather, he maintained personal relationships to Klan members and refused to hate them for their hateful views. When people asked him if he thought he could save the souls of such evil

men, Campbell answered that would be presumptuous of him. But he added, "They might, however, save mine." In his first book, *Race and the Renewal of the Church*, Campbell declared:

I have seen and known the resentment of the racist, his hostility, his frustration, his need for someone upon whom to lay blame and punish. I know he is mistaken, misguided, and willfully disobedient, but somehow I am not always able to distinguish between him and myself. My sins may not be his, but they are no less real and heinous. Perhaps I have been too close to this man. Perhaps if I had not heard his anguished cry when the rains didn't come in time to save his cotton, if I had not felt the severity of his economic deprivation, if I had not looked upon his agony on Christmas Eve while I, his six year old child feigning sleep, waited for a Santa who would never come; if I had not been one of him through these gales of tragedy, I would be able to condemn him without hesitation. If I had not shared his plight; if I had not lived with him in an atmosphere of suspicion, distrust, ignorance, misinformation, and nefarious political leadership, surely my heart would break less when I see him fomenting mob violence in front of his schoolhouse and his church house. Perhaps I would not pity him as much if I were not from his loins. But pity him I do.

Wrestling with this vision of his own face in the face of his enemy, Campbell came up with his theology in a nutshell. He says, "*We're all (jerks), but God loves us anyway!*"

If an enemy turns upon us with hatred and spite, bitter, insecure, frightened little souls needing to control by way of demagoguery and exclusion, and we, in our resistance, also become hateful, spiteful, bitter little souls needing to exclude them, has the enemy not won in a fundamental way? If, in the heat of debate and self-defense, we wither spiritually to the point where we celebrate our enemy's personal woes, we are no better than they. But then, indeed, that is the whole point of the gospel. We are no better than they ... we are just as sinful, limited, and shaped in ways that we do not even see by the culture around us. And the grace of God is for them as well as for us.

Jesus had the Divine ability not to be shaped by those who opposed him. He did not react to provocation but responded out of the center of his being. Perhaps he recognized also the terrible waste of energy in letting ourselves be consumed by hatred. A medieval Jewish story tells of an angel who appeared to a man and told him he would return in thirty days and grant the man one wish. He could have whatever he wanted if he would accept the condition that whatever he wished, his neighbor would receive the same doubled. But the man hated his neighbor, and he could not bear the thought that his neighbor would receive twice as much as he.

He could hardly sleep for thinking of it, and spent his thirty days thinking more of his hatred for his enemy than his blessing by God. Consequently, when the angel returned and asked what he wished, the man answered, "I want you to put out one of my eyes."

The Old Testament prescription for justice, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," was invoked to limit the cycle of violent retaliation so that total war would not result from minor offenses. Otherwise, as Tevia says, we would all be blind and toothless. The New Testament replaced it with the law of love. "Love your enemies, Jesus commanded, "and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:44-45).

The difference between "us" and "them" ought always to be that we include them in the grace of God even though they might exclude us. If we ever lose that difference, we will betray what we claim to believe. Remember the classic words of the cartoon character Pogo? "*We have met the enemy and he is us.*" God grant us the humility to see that every human struggle is "us against us", and that God's grace in Christ is for all of us, everywhere, including even the people we don't like because, well, they don't like us. May we pray?

God of us all, Grant us courage to stand for what is right, to work for justice, and to proclaim the gospel in the world, even if it means opposition. But grant us also the strength of Spirit to respond to opposition with grace and in all circumstances be Christian, for Jesus' sake. Amen.