

Whoever Is Not Against Us

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Ancient Witness: Luke 9:46-50

Today I want to focus on one of the aphorisms that Jesus used that is one of my favorites. It appears in both Luke and Mark, and the short saying goes: “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Isn’t that great!

While many of the Jesus scholars believe that this saying wasn’t original to Jesus, himself, it sounds like something that he would have used, since it is very consistent with the rest of his teachings. Now the fact that Jesus sometimes used common sayings should not shock us. This was the style among all the wisdom teachers of his era.

There is one record of a version of this same proverb used a century earlier by Cicero, who wrote:

Though we held everyone to be our opponents except those on our side, you (Caesar) counted everybody as your adherent who was not against you.

Cicero, the famous Roman statesman, orator and author was saying this approach toward others was part of the uncommon wisdom that helped make Caesar great.

But this saying is reminiscent of the openness and inclusiveness of Jesus, and so many scholars agree that it is quite likely that he adopted it as his own.

In both cases, the context is that the disciples try to stop a strange exorcist from practicing that what they perceive as their craft. One of them says,

Master, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he isn’t one of us.

How many times have we heard this? “He’s not one of us.” He’s not part of our religion, our political party, our race, our gender, our sexual orientation, our economic class, and on and on.

Jesus then responds with his typical attitude of inclusiveness—you don’t have to be one of us to be O.K., to be on our side. This reminds me of when his disciples once said to Jesus, “Your brothers and mother are standing outside.” And he responds, “Those here who do what my Father wants are my brothers and my mother.” Jesus opened the idea of family to extend beyond bloodlines. He expanded the concept of family to include even those who were on the margins of society in his time: lepers, toll collectors, women, children, Samaritans and even enemies. All of these people are on our side, he said, if they aren’t against us.

Now, what is really interesting is that in Luke and Matthew we also have Jesus saying the opposite, exclusive version of this aphorism. How can this be? What is going on? They have Jesus saying: “The one who isn’t with me is against me.” (Luke 11:23, Matt. 12:30)

Do you see how this is exclusive and the other one is inclusive? This one says that if you are not for me, you are against me. This second one demands total allegiance and conformity. It demands a confession of faith, a signature on the dotted line. Everyone else will be regarded with suspicion. Everyone who is not an official member, who is not “one of us” will be considered to be against us. If there is any question, then we’ll just assume that they are against us. That will be the default position. This, by the way, was George Bush’s version about 15 years ago. And he actually said it this way: “If you aren’t with us, you’re against us.”

Many scholars think that the gospel writers put this version in the mouth of Jesus because the early Christian community was beginning to define its limits. They were getting concerned about their institutional survival, and so the barriers went up. And they actually turned around the aphorism that Jesus originally used, and so we have the appearance of Jesus saying contradictory or even opposite things in the gospel accounts. The second version does not reflect Jesus’ overall message, but more the fear and anxieties of the first Christian communities. They were “circling the wagons,” so to speak, a very natural and human response.

You can see the difference between the two. “If you are not with us, you are against us” assumes a total, unquestioning allegiance. It connotes that if you are not behind everything we do, if you do not agree with us about everything, then you are our enemy.

I have a friend back in Chicago who was the rabbi of a very liberal Reconstructionist Jewish synagogue. That large congregation was on the forefront of many social justice issues. However, when he started criticizing the government of Israel for its brutal treatment of the Palestinian people, he received vocal opposition not just from the outside but from a group within his own congregation. He had done the unthinkable by challenging the apartheid practices—the wholesale imprisonment, the deaths, the destruction of houses and crops, the theft of land and the immiseration of the Palestinian people. They called my friend antisemitic—this Jewish rabbi! This was the attitude: if you are not for us all the way, if you dare to criticize us and disagree with us, then you are against us and you are our enemy. He resigned from his position and started a new synagogue and named it *Tzedek*, which means “Justice” in Hebrew. This reminded me of the slogan: “America, love it or leave it,” that was used to silence opposition to the Viet Nam War.

Now, this mentality has been prevalent in the Christian church for centuries, as well. If you don’t believe all the correct doctrine, then you are a heretic, you don’t belong and are an enemy of the church.

But the other view, the view of Jesus, is that if you don’t treat us as an enemy, we’re going to assume that you are on our side. If you just disagree on some things, that’s fine, we’re still going to assume we are friends.

Now what got me thinking about Jesus' bit of uncommon wisdom was how one of our political parties has adopted this attitude that if you're not totally with us, you're against us. It demands total fealty and absolute allegiance to one person, requiring that one not challenge the Big Lie that Biden and Harris didn't actually win the election or that the former president's behavior was acceptable on January 6. Several in the party, including Liz Cheney, dared to deviate from this. Because they were not lock-step with the party, because they did not "bend the knee," they became enemies of the party.

This is completely different from the way that Jesus viewed the world. Jesus was not about building fences between "us and them." To the contrary, he was about tearing down the walls that divide, much to the discomfort of his followers.

New Testament scholar, Robert Funk, wrote:

In a well-ordered society, people know their places. In Jesus' world the few rich and the many poor knew their places... Social stratification was enforced by the purity codes, which segregated lepers, women, children, petty tax officials, demoniacs, the physically handicapped, and gentiles.

Jesus, who lived as a homeless traveler, dependent upon the kindness of strangers, regarded himself as an outcast. "No prophet is welcome on his home turf," he said. He knew the experience of being "without honor," of being considered "not one of us."

In a number of [Jesus'] sayings he embraces the beggars, the poor, the hungry, the mournful as he moves about Galilee. He becomes known as a friend of toll collectors and sinners—those who fall outside the boundaries of acceptable company. Jesus appears to ignore the social boundaries of his society in the most radical manner.

The default position of Jesus was to be open and to include. If someone hasn't opposed you, attacked you—you assume that they are for you. "Whoever is not against us is for us." This is true even of the outcasts and the outsiders.

Funk wrote:

The invisible domain of God is populated with the poor, the destitute, with women and unwanted children, with lepers, and toll collectors, all considered under some circumstances to be the dregs of society. They are outcasts and outsiders. They are exiles from their native religious tradition. No wonder Jesus' auditors were puzzled by his vision of the population of God's domain—it contradicted their normal notion of who belonged and who did not, of who was in and who was out.

The good news is that nobody can keep you out of God's domain. It is available to every person regardless of race or religion or ability or orientation or gender or status or past offenses. It is radically open at each moment in time to move in or out. It's up to us simply to see, to accept to enjoy, to realize.

Franz Kafka wrote a collection called *Parables and Paradoxes*, in which there is a parable called “The Watchman” or “The Guard.” It goes like this:

I ran past the first guard. Then I was horrified, I ran back and said to the guard: “I just ran through here while you were looking the other way.”

The guard looked straight ahead and said nothing.

“I suppose I shouldn’t have done it,” I said.

The guard still said nothing.

“Does your silence mean I have permission to enter?”

Permission to enter, according to Jesus, is not required. No one has that power. We don’t need to be authorized or to give authorization to others. We don’t need proof that they are “one of us.” We don’t need to show proof at the door, either.

We don’t need all the answers, and we don’t need to be right to enter a kingdom where we are not condemned as we don’t condemn others.

Thanks be to God.