

## On God's Side

Mark 9:38-50

A couple of weeks ago, if you wanted to know who was supporting a team, you just had to look around. Iowa State fans were proudly wearing their cardinal and gold, and Iowa fans were wearing black and gold. Yet sometimes it was difficult. If someone was wearing just gold, they could be supporting either team. If they were wearing more neutral colors, it was difficult to tell which team they were cheering for. Even the Iowa State football team on the field wore uniforms that didn't have any cardinal or gold on them, only black and white. But if you wanted to know which side people were on, you watched to see who they cheered for.

The disciples in the Gospel lesson see someone who seems to be on God's side, too, and they question Jesus about him. They've seen someone driving out demons in the name of Jesus, and that's a problem for them for two reasons. The first is that they don't know this guy. They don't know who he is, how he heard about Jesus, or what his credentials are. The second is that he is doing something they were unable to do themselves. They'd failed to drive out a demon themselves, and had to go to Jesus for help. This guy they don't know could do it. They are not overjoyed that Jesus' name has spread so far that people they don't know are calling on it to do miracles. They are just concerned about their own place as Jesus' followers, and this outsider who is showing them up. They know they are on God's side, and this other guy can't be, can he?

When they raise this question, though, they don't speak for God. They speak out of pride and ambition. They speak out of the same pride and ambition that led them to argue about which one of them was the greatest earlier on the road. They speak out of fear, since this

unnamed disciple is doing what the main disciples could not.

Jesus knows this unnamed exorcist isn't an imposter. He tells his disciples, "For the one who is not against us is for us." Jesus knows that no one can drive out demons in his name without faith, just as Paul would later write that "no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). Jesus knows this man is on God's side because of how he uses his name. Instead of condemning the man like the disciples wanted him to, Jesus commends him.

Who's on God's side? We still face that question. We face it as we watch political drama unfold, with both sides claiming to be on God's side to find out the truth. We face it as religious leaders declare political positions. We face it as we look at the divisions caused by the pandemic and our response to it, divisions over masks and vaccines. We face it as we look at other groups that claim to be acting in Jesus' name. Who's on God's side?

How are you showing that God's on your side? Are you using the name of Jesus to build others up, to pray, praise, and give thanks? Are you using it to glorify God?

Or are you using God's name to make yourself look better? Are you using God's name to make your opinion more believable, or to try to place your opinion above criticism? Are you using God's name to merely add emphasis?

And then the question becomes, is, how does your use of God's name show whose side you are on? Does your use of God's name point people to Jesus, who loves them and cares for them and went to the cross for them and their sins? Or does it point people way from Jesus?

That's why Jesus went to the cross. All the sin of the world, all of the rebelliousness that keeps us from being on God's side, was placed on him there, when he fulfilled the law that reads "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Galatians 3:13). The author of Hebrews also reminds us that "Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood" (Hebrews 13:12). Jesus went away from God's side to be with us, to take the punishment we deserved, so we could be restored to God's side.

During the American Civil War, the fighting was sometimes fiercest because it was between people who claimed to follow the same rules, who had the same ancestry, who thought alike. Both sides were also often Christians, and preachers from both sides could quote scripture passages to show God was on their side. When questioned about this, President Abraham Lincoln replied, "my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

When I was growing up, we went on a lot of field trips. Whenever we went somewhere, our teachers reminded us that we were representing not just ourselves, but our group, our school, and our community. The name of our school, the name of our community, the name of our group went wherever we did, and the impressions we left would follow that name. Were we the group that caused noise complaints in the hotel, or did we leave our rooms better than we found them? What we did represented not just us, but the names that we carried and used.

A few years ago, the Beta Sigs shared an article that reminded the fraternity brothers that they are always wearing the name of their fraternity, or as the article put it, you are always wearing your letters. The article read, in part:

When you go to the grocery store, you represent us. If you fall asleep in class or

earn a weak grade, you represent us. When you drive down the road and slow down so a pedestrian can cross the street, you represent us. When you turn 21 and hit the town, you represent us. When you become a leader of another campus organization, you represent us. When you insult someone or talk badly about another fraternity, you represent us. When you break up with someone and make decisions about how you behave during that difficult time, you represent us. When you go on Spring Break, you represent us. When you go home and sit at your mother's dining room table, you represent us. When you get a job and go to work for a company or organization, you represent us. When you commit your life to that special person, someday, you represent us. You are always wearing your letters.

As Christians, we are always wearing our letters. We are always wearing the name of Christ. They may not always be visible. You may not always have a cross around your neck, a WWJD bracelet on your wrist, a Christian t-shirt on, or a Christian bumper sticker on your car. But when people know who you are and what you believe, your actions reflect the name of Christ. You show which side you're on by what you wear and how you act.

How do we recognize who is on God's side? Those who use God's name correctly, who use it in prayer and praise, not to lie or bolster their image. Those who call on God for forgiveness, who confess their sin and unworthiness. Those who see in Jesus how God came alongside us to teach us and show us how much God loves us. Those who cross man-made lines to share a cool cup of water or a home cooked meal. That's who is on God's side. That's the side we should be on, too.

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