

“Who Is In And Who Is Out”

Dr. D. Jay Losher

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Mark 9:38-50 = Boundaries in God’s Network

As a sign of how technology has changed so much so rapidly, the word ‘friend’ used to be a noun and now is a verb. How many are on Facebook? For those who Facebook (also a verb now), how do you decide who to friend and who not to friend?



For Facebook users, this is a dilemma ~ whether to accept someone as a friend or not. Each of us sets our own criteria: some friend anyone who asks to friend them and then mine their lists of friends for others, complete strangers. Others are more selective, only friending those who they actually know in the real world ~ what a concept!

This is a dilemma in the real world that we all face. How do we decide who is ‘in’ our group and who is not. Where does ‘us’ end and where does ‘them’ begin? How do we know who is family and friend, and how do we know who is foe?



This is a big question, a major issue for Jesus: Who is my neighbor? Who is part of God’s family and who is not? Jesus had quite a bit to say about it ~ today’s text for example.

The disciples came to Jesus with a vexing problem.

“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”



He isn’t one of us, they were saying ~ not like us. He’s broken our copyright. Jesus, zap him.

But Jesus answers:

“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

What? And Jesus continues:





“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.”

The disciples ask the boundary question: “Where do we draw the line? Who is with us and who is not?” “Who is in and who is out?”

Jesus’ answer surprises us:

“God’s group is much bigger than you could ever have imagined!”

Jesus continues by berating the disciples for their prejudices:

“In fact, if you place a stumbling block before one of these who believe in me, you deserve punishment.”



Jesus is talking here about God’s boundaries ~ and the opposite, the disciples’ prejudices and biases against someone perceived as “not following us.” We do that too. We assume that a person who doesn’t look like us, doesn’t act like us, or worse yet, doesn’t think like us, then that person couldn’t possibly be one of us.



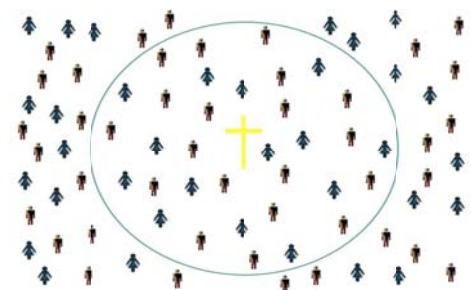
Janet Ruack, one of my pastors’ group colleagues, recalls that she had been approached by a group called Bikers for Jesus. She was quite skeptical. She wasn’t sure what they stood for, but could imagine and didn’t like the ideas which were coming to mind.

She thought about our passage for today and then thought to herself “OK, I’m not sure about these Bikers for Jesus, but I better give them the benefit of the doubt. After all they have taken the name of Jesus.” It turns out they do a lot of good work. Their main mission was visiting folks in the nursing home and showing the love of Christ. How’s that for an image: Hell’s Angels in the nursing home caring for folks!?

Yet that is exactly what Jesus is talking about.

Now don’t be confused. Jesus in other Gospels says the opposite of today’s text in Mark. Matthew records Jesus as saying:

“Whoever is not for us is against us.”¹



Luke has it both ways adding to the confusion.²

The variants of the text exhibit two opposite views: an inclusive and an exclusive vision of discipleship. Over the centuries the church has exhibited a marked tendency toward a more and more exclusive understanding of discipleship, drawing clearer and more explicit boundaries, subdividing into Catholics and Methodists and Orthodox and Presbyterians and Lutherans and Baptists and even divisions within denominations.

Given all that, I choose to interpret the original intention of Jesus as inclusive. With two “**for’s**” and two “**against’s**,” mix in the principle that the church tends to get further and further from Jesus’ intention over time, I believe Jesus’ original words to be the inclusive version:



“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

As one scholar has put it looking at the whole of the Gospel:³

- “Whenever you want to draw lines in order to mark who is outside the kingdom and who is inside, always remember: Jesus is on the other side of the line! Jesus is always with the outsiders!”

Richard Jensen



Any line in the sand that we draw, Jesus is on the other side of that line ~ always. Jesus is inclusive ~ inclusive of more and more different people. That is the main thrust of the Gospel. Jesus is always drawing the circle larger than we would, not smaller ~ always expanding not contracting the kingdom ~ always showing grace not bias, bigotry and prejudice. Our tendency of course is the precise opposite.

How does Jesus end this cautionary admonition about causing a little one to stumble? On a positive note:



“Brothers and sisters,” Jesus is saying, “Whoever is not against us is for us. Whoever does anything good in my name does good indeed. Don’t be biased against those whom you in your weakness consider outsiders. Have salt, that is, confidence of your convictions ~ not your prejudices. And especially have confidence in yourself and be at peace with everyone who uses my name.”

There are some who have caught this vision. Going against millennia of doctrines of exclusion, Pope Francis in a powerful homily on our text today says in Christ all denominational barriers, even faith barriers, are broken down:



“The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! ‘Father, the atheists?’ Even the atheists. Everyone!”⁴

Nadia Bolz-Weber, nationally known pastor who founded a congregation in Denver while still a divinity student, Bolz-Weber has just resigned from that congregation she founded.



The House for All Sinners and Saints has consciously broken almost every human boundary to build a church of outsiders for outsiders ~ a place of authentic diversity and true welcome for all. It has attracted hundreds who have experienced rejection in other congregations: drug addicts, the deeply depressed, persons of color, from the LGBTQ community, and even those who are not believers.

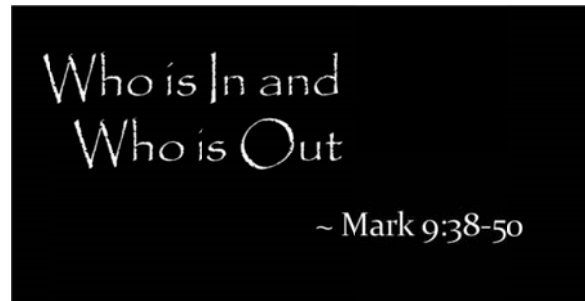
Bolz-Weber is leaving to extend her calling to be a pastor to outsiders and to continue breaking down human constructed barriers. She is exploring new avenues for ministry as a full-time “public theologian.” She wants to reach even further out for outsiders, to “preach to the Gentiles.”⁵

What are God’s boundaries? That’s the most important question Scripture addresses. God’s Spirit moves independently of all our human assumptions. God’s boundaries are not our boundaries.



God's Spirit empowers us to love even those we consider unlovable.

God does not share our way of thinking, our bias and prejudices. God does not endorse our bigotry. God's love extends to everyone ~ even those we don't like, even those we don't want God to like. Jesus is inclusive. God's community has an open door, always has, always will.



We can never out grace God. We can never out-inclusive God. We can never outfriend God, but Jesus wants us to try.

¹ Matthew 12:30

² Luke 11-23 and Luke 9:50

³ Richard Jensen, *Preaching Mark*, p. 61

⁴ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/22/pope-francis-good-atheists_n_3320757.html

⁵ <https://religionnews.com/2018/08/05/headed-for-a-larger-stage-nadia-bolz-weber-leaves-her-house-in-order-2/>