

Taking Sides

Taking sides—that is clearly a feature of our society today. It is something that seems like it is almost done as a reflex reaction; the reaction of opposition is taken before the basis for the “other” side is heard—and often shows little respect or tolerance toward whatever is idea on the “other” side. The texts before us today have a theme recognizing this phenomenon of the existence of sides and our perceptions of them. We see the issue beginning with the Psalm chosen, Psalm 24, which lifts a song of praise for God being on the side of the psalmist. Too often we misunderstand this concept to mean that God is our special possession or the champion of OUR causes; the ideas we support. We tend to assume the rightness of the side we have chosen. It should give us all pause to think when we see that everyone, even those on the “other side” believe that “God is on our side”. This is true on many of these modern day issues involving side taking. But although still concerned with this notion of side taking, the other three texts revolve around the role of human beings in advocating, angling and agitation for God’s will to be done—on human beings being on God’s side and whether or not they have the authority to speak about God’s support. Perhaps this means we should examine our choices and orientation to ensure that WE are on God’s side. Even though God is not named in the book of Esther the narrative tells how God places her in a position to rescue her people through courage and daring, petitioning the king as advocate for her powerless people at the risk of her own life. The lectionary passages come near the end of the crisis when Esther has acted. But her first reaction when Mordecai tells her of the decree to destroy all Jewish people is self-preservation. She changes her mind, even though she still feels at risk. The basis for this willingness to risk comes from Mordecai’s advice. We recognize that as Mordecai has confident trust in the deliverance of his people based on the covenant promises of God. Mordecai declares to Esther in Chapter 4: 14—“For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” The covenant promise will be kept—God is on the side of the Jewish people so that they will not be destroyed—but Esther is called to be an instrument in that deliverance—to be on God’s side. The Letter from James in the passage for today urges those in his assembly to pray for one another so that they may be healed saying that “the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” Here again, the human impulse is to seek to get God on their side, enlisting the prayers of the “elders of the church”. Here the assumption is that the “elders” and the “righteous” have a special role in this process of obtaining God’s favor. This brings us to the gospel passage from Mark where we find Jesus’ own view of this issue of favoritism. This text which follows immediately upon the discussion that Jesus has with the disciples about their desire to be the greatest. Jesus has just restated that to be a disciple of his one must not seek greatness, but instead seek to serve—and to serve those who are most vulnerable in the society—those like children who have no status, in whose service there is nothing to be gained for one’s self within society. I imagine this scene to be followed by an awkward silence. That awkward silence seems to be the backdrop to the passage just read. In this passage, one of the disciples---John---raises his hand and changes the uncomfortable subject about humility. John introduces a new topic for which there is seemingly no connection to what Jesus has told them

about their responsibilities as disciples. John says, rather proudly it seems that the disciples had seen “someone casting out demons in his name and they had tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” Note the reasoning here: “Because he was not following us.” Here is that issue of “sides” again. If there’s an “us,” then there’s surely got to be a “them,” right? Not everybody can be on “our side,” so there’s got to be an “other side,” right? That’s the logic of Jesus’ disciple John in this passage. Jesus is in a house in Capernaum with his disciples, having a heart-to-heart about an awkward moment that had just transpired. The disciples, who in Mark’s gospel are not the sharpest knives in the tool drawer, have just thoroughly embarrassed themselves again with their talk of greatness. Having been reprimanded and evidently seeking a way to justify themselves and regain favor in Jesus’ eyes an attempt is made to try to change the topic to one about an “outsider”. This statement by John is interesting, because although the disciples attempt to stop this “outsider”, evidently they are not successful. This “outsider” was casting out demons in Jesus’ name. The casting out of demons was the ancient world’s way of describing psychological or physical healing, so this individual is doing something good using Jesus’ name. It is not exactly clear if the statement by John, other than being an attempt at distracting Jesus from their lack of understanding, is a complaint or an accusation. Is John complaining because this “outsider” is successful in casting out demons? Is it a complaint about the use of Jesus’ name because the disciples feel only they, as “insiders” should be able to use his name? Even though something good is being done, they feel this use is “unauthorized.” Is it an accusation that Jesus’ name has power even when it is used by someone not in their group? The disciples want Jesus to affirm their judgment and action against this other user of Jesus’ name because he was not playing according to their rules or following their lead. In other words, they have decided who they are. They are the authorized disciples and thus defined themselves as arbitrators of who will be accepted into their circle. They have ruled against this other person. They are the leaders of the fledgling Jesus movement. They consider themselves more important than others doing work in Jesus’ name. They are the inner circle and should be obeyed by lesser disciples. What is really striking about all this is how it relates to what has just gone before. All this happens almost immediately after Jesus has chided their earlier arguments about which of them was the greatest. It seems that all Jesus’ admonishment did was to give up vying amongst themselves for greatness so that they could together set boundaries excluding everyone else. The disciples struggle to understand Jesus’ identity as Messiah and what that means. They also struggle with this question of their own identity and how it will be shown in their lives. On this question of identity, like those disciples we are often tempted to take matters into our own hands and define it for ourselves. We like to draw boundaries. The disciples view this individual as “not being on our side”. If he isn’t one of us, they feel he has no right to the use of Jesus’ name. They expect praise for this defense of Jesus’ name. But Jesus’ response is anything else but praise. Jesus refuses to accept this boundary, this line-drawing which excludes the individual who was casting out demons. Jesus rejects this line drawing by John in three ways. First, Jesus says that anybody who uses his name in a positive way will hardly be able to say negative things later on. Then Jesus simply says: “Whosoever is not against us is for us.” And finally, Jesus declares that anybody—anybody who does an act of kindness—even an act as small as providing a drink of cold water to the thirsty in his name—will have a reward. In today’s passage, Jesus effectively says “not so fast” to the

disciples with their desire to exclude. Jesus draws a line but in a different way. He draws a much bigger circle, one that includes people who find something powerful in the name “Jesus” even if they’re not on the Jesus team so to speak. He draws a circle, a much bigger one that includes people of mercy who offer strangers a cool drink. He draws a bigger circle which includes people of good will who don’t share our particular theology but are “not against us” either. We have an identity as Christ’s disciples. Our identity is based on particular understandings of the text we have received. It is our centering anchor, but we should remember that Jesus drew a larger circle around himself to include not only the disciples but others who acted according to his teachings or used his name to center their actions. What we need to remember in all of our side-taking is that we are called to be on God’s side by following the teachings of Christ—caring for others, treating others with justice and mercy, witnessing to God’s love for all people. Christ spent much of his ministry with the outcasts and rejected of his day; the tax collectors, the poor, the sinners and even Gentiles. He healed them. He fed them. He taught them. Christ demonstrated that he was on the side of these who were considered “others”, those who were marginalized by the culture in which they lived. So when we consider our actions, are they placing us on God’s side?

The truly good news we have is that even when we fail to act as faithful witnesses to God’s love, even when our actions are not of those acting on “God’s side”, through the grace and mercy of our Lord—God is always on our side with forgiveness and the offer of redemption. Thanks be to God.