

³⁸ John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us.

[Explanation of Fantasy Football. How hard it is for me to get over my prejudices about certain players, upon whose play my score depends.]

Jesus Christ said he had never been to a football game. So my friends and I took him to one. It was a ferocious battle between the Protestant Punchers and the Catholic Crusaders.

The Crusaders scored first. Jesus cheered wildly and threw his hat high up in the air. Then the Punchers scored. And Jesus cheered wildly and threw his hat high up in the air.

This seemed to puzzle the man behind us. He tapped Jesus on the shoulder and asked, "Which side are you rooting for, my good man?"

"Me?" replied Jesus, visibly excited by the game. "Oh, I'm not rooting for either side. I'm just enjoying the game."

The questioner turned to his neighbor and sneered, "Hmm, obviously an atheist!" (story by Anthony DeMello)

I just read Doris Pillington's book, ***Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence***, which tells the fascinating story of young part-Aboriginal girls in Australia — **Mollie, Daisy, and Gracie**, ranging in age from eight to fourteen years of age. Historically, "half-caste children" (half-Aboriginal and half-Caucasian) were considered wards of the Australian government and were, therefore, forcibly removed from their families and taken to settlement schools that were very much life jails (with locked doors, barred windows, and a hole for solitary

confinement, as well as shaving of heads and beating, for those who broke the rules. (Two days in solitary confinement was the punishment for “talking back” to a teacher.) The purpose of these schools was to prepare these Aboriginal children for their role in white society as domestic servants and farmworkers.

The girls could not bear to stay, and escaped, against all odds, covering a thousand miles, at about 25 miles a day, to return home, escaping a massive manhunt conducted by police and other government authorities in tracker airplanes.

This true dramatic story of a return home, set in the 1930’s, reminded me of childhood stories I read and saw at the theater, about dogs who overcame huge odds to return home: *The Incredible Journey*, and *Lassie Come Home*.

But, even more, the story of **Mollie, Grace and Daisy** reminded me of the story repeated over and over throughout the centuries, and across America and countries all around the world, where people come to a new land and make prisoners, or refugees, out of the people whose land was taken away from them. These “*first-landers*” turned into something akin to animals by their “*new-landers*,” are always considered inferior, and deserving of their treatment.

This sermon is not intended to be a guilt-trip for people who do this, although that certainly would not be inaccurate. Rather, it is to point out **the contrast to** what Jesus was all about. Today’s Gospel shows how even Jesus’ disciples were not above such misguided thinking. (cf. Luke 9:49-50)

Just what was Jesus thinking, when he said: **“the one who is not against us is for us”** ?

First: it is certainly counter cultural to how we tend to distinguish people and put them into the camp of the “*other*”: Hear the story told by Emo Phillips:

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said **"Stop! don't do it!"**

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, **"Well, there's so much to live for!"**

He said, **"Like what?"**

I said, **"Well...are you religious or atheist?"**

He said, **"Religious."**

I said, **"Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?"**

He said, **"Christian."**

I said, **"Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"**

He said, **"Protestant."**

I said, **"Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"**

He said, **"Baptist!"**

I said, **"Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"**

He said, **"Baptist Church of God!"**

I said, **"Me too! Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"**

He said, **"Reformed Baptist Church of God!"**

I said, **"Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"**

He said, **"Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915!"**

I said, **"Die, heretic scum,"** and pushed him off the bridge.

Jesus said: **"the one who is not against us is for us."** It may not be the “natural” thing for us to do ... but what we call “natural” may have more to

do with (as Charles Wesley called it) our “bent to sinning,” that with what is good for us or good for living.

When we live life unintentionally, just doing what comes naturally, often it is against the Plan for Living that the Creator made.

Second: It ratifies Jesus’ second commandment: **Love your neighbor as yourself.**

Jane’s great aunt who told her that she was related to some figure that Jane had been studying in school; I think it was Pocahontas, or some native Indian person. Her rationale was simple: we all came from Adam and Eve, so we must be related. When Jane first told me that story, I “naturally” thought: “Well that’s silly.” But, as I thought about it more, I began to realize that her logic might be more Christ-like than I first believed.

The children reported to Janet in last week’s children sermon that they are each: a beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold. And so aren’t all of God’s children. If God love all His children, then why do make a higher standard than God does.

Third: *It is not just about people.*

There may be a “natural” / ”bent to sinning” urge to purge all people who are not “like us.”

There also is for many people a “natural” / ”bent to sinning” urge to purge all circumstances which don’t make us feel good.

We have a choice with people (sometimes). We oftentimes do NOT have a choice with circumstances.

When we learn to be more accepting of people different from us (“**the one who is not against us is for us.**”) we WILL come to realize the goodness comes to our life by accepting God’s created diversity.

That openness ... that willingness ... to accept a diversified life will allow us to see that life is better when everyone around us is not just like us.

And, THEN, we can live life more fully when we accept that a diversified life of circumstances also enriches us.

When something “bad” happens to us ... something over which we have no control ... we can get angry ... we can get depressed ... we can turn our back on God (or, at least, try to.)

However ... and please, please, please ... do NOT hear me here to speak the secular *Gospel of Optimism ... (if life gives you lemons, make lemonade)* ... because when bad things happen, you do feel bad. No one ever should say, “You need to stop that; just put on a happy face.”

But you **CAN** remember that ***this is a stopping place, not a ending place*** ... you CAN remember that ... if you have memories of that being true.

When we learn from life experience to be open to people different from us, we can also learn that life’s circumstances, which don’t make us happy, can ultimately enrich us.

Or – to put it another way – a demand for PURITY/UNIFORMITY in whom we find acceptable (in people) – will also not allow us to ever find meaning in life that doesn’t go just the way we want it.

It is DIVERSITY in people that is related to DIVERSITY in circumstances.

“All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose.” Paul said that. (Romans 8:28) Jesus said: ***“the one who is not against us is for us.”***

These two principles are related ... cut from the same bolt of cloth. God’s commandments are not to beat us up, but are a prescription for how we can live a better life – round peg fitting into round hole – living life according to the Creator’s blueprint.

This Fantasy Football thing is doing something to me that ***used to pinch***. I had a hard time seeing anything good in the people who play for rivals to my favorite football team. Now, I find myself appreciating their talent, because they are helping my Fantasy Football score.

Now, I grant you, ***this is still selfish on my part***. But it’s opening me up to looking at people differently.

And – this is the real kicker – when we follow Jesus’ commandments -- ***“the one who is not against us is for us”*** – it also might “pinch” at first. ***But it ends up being in our own self-interest.***

That is the GOOD NEWS – even if it doesn’t fit into what we feel is “natural” to begin with. It ends up being the best for us. BUT we are given the CHOICE. Let those who have ears, hear.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.