

## Sermon: Against Us or For Us

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, on Sept. 26, 2021)

Mathematical sign of division ( $\div$ ) is a symbol consisting of a short horizontal line with a dot above and another dot below. Whoever invented this sign must be brilliant. Visually speaking, the horizontal line separates the two dots clearly, there is no connection nor confusion between the dot above and the dot below—you are either one or the other, clearly separated, clearly divided. The usage of this sign of division is quite simple and clear in the field of mathematic. However, if one were to project it in the field of human behaviours, it gets somewhat muddy. So, let me give it a try and rephrase this sign of division into this following statement: 'You are either with us or against us'.

Statement as such is really an attempt to move the middle ground, to shake it, break it, and render it un-tenable. It forces those who are uncertain, undecided as to which side they belong to make a concrete decision—you are either with us or against us.

Politicians of various stripes, including Marcus Tullius Cicero, Vladimir Lenin, Benito Mussolini, had long employed such a statement or something similar to drive a wedge, to divide. Of course, the more recent and memorable usage should be attributed to President George W. Bush, in an address to the joint session of Congress, short after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, who stated, "*Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.*" Given the context of the time 20 years ago, the raw emotion of outrage against those senseless attacks, the 'coalition of the willing' that was assembled by Bush became rather sizeable. However, the outcome of subsequent 'war on terror' is much less clear. Perhaps, as many had noted quite early on, without taking into account the root cause of terror (here I am referring to the rise of radical Islamic extremism), the gesture of drawing a line on the sand, or making circles large or small, is simply futile.

There is another way to reformulate the mindset of 'you are either with us or against us'. I am thinking of the the statement that Jesus made in Mark 9:40, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Jesus said it to his disciples, after John urged him, "*Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.*" (v.38)

By this point in the Gospel of Mark, the name of Jesus has become widespread and powerful. Jesus has also started to speak openly about his death. He was moving decidedly towards Jerusalem, towards the cross. He urged those following him to pick up their own cross, as the cost of discipleship. There was a mounting sense of expectation and tension surrounding Jesus' next moves.

However, not everyone were literally following Jesus. Evidently, some were happy to reap the benefits, without actually paying the cost—they were doing wonders in the name of Jesus without actually knowing or following Jesus. So to the objection of the disciples who were trying to limit what they could not control, Jesus responded with a heart of generosity, *“Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.”*

Jesus seems eager to draw the circle wide to include those at the fringes of his movement, he seems eager that his followers to do like wise. So he uttered the statement, *“Whoever is not against us is for us.”*

We learn the same lesson from Moses. I feel sorry for Moses, I really do. During the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, he was a prophet without honour, a shepherd without a field. He was leading a flock of rag-tag former slaves, who were whiny without end.

They complained about not having water to drink, so God provided streams of flowing water right from a rock. They complained about not having food to eat, so God provided Manna from heaven that could be picked fresh each and every day right from the ground. Now they were complaining about not having meat to eat. Meat! Did the Israelites actually ate meat in Egypt, when they weren't even given straws to make bricks? Yet they wailed and lamented, *“Why did we ever leave Egypt?”* I suspect, this really was a case of nostalgia-gone-mad, a case of non-existing-good-old-days.

Nevertheless, God was ever so gracious and compassionate, always full of mercy and willing to meet the people wherever they were. So facing this overwhelming desire to eat meat, God promised the Israelites that they will be given meat to eat. In Numbers 11:19-20, God said, *“You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’”*

Furthermore, in a gesture to alleviate the fear, the doubt, and the burden of Moses, God instructed that a group of seventy elders be assembled around the tabernacle—the tent of meeting. When God came down in the cloud to speak to Moses in plain view of all, God would also place some of the spirit on the seventy, so they too would prophesy.

However, as that spectacular scene was unfolding, two men, Eldad and Medad, who were registered as part of the seventy, but had not gone out to the tent. They too were filled with the spirit and began to prophesy. When word reached Joshua son of Nun, the right-hand man of Moses, he was displeased. It somehow interfered with his flow chart, disrupted his standard operating procedure. So Joshua complained to Moses, *“My lord Moses, stop them!”* But Moses replied humbly in verse 29, *“Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”*

Moses recognized that he was not in control, God was. Moses acknowledged that when it comes to the Spirit of God, the Spirit goes where it goes. Who could really predict it or control it? Who really comprehends the mind of God? Furthermore, should all the people of God be filled with the Holy Spirit, would that really be a bad thing? On the contrary, wouldn’t that be a really amazing event. A sign of more wonders to come?

Living Faith 4.3.4 informs us that *“The Spirit blesses us with various gifts. We seek to discover those gifts and to use them for our Lord. Faithful loving service is a sign that the Spirit is present. The presence of the Spirit is evident where people are made whole, encouraged, and enabled to grow in Christ.”*

The Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin is widely regarded as the most influential works of Protestant theology. It is interesting in how Calvin organizes his work. He begins with a section on God the Father, which is followed by a section on God the Son. One would expect that Calvin should then proceed to write about God the Spirit, but what we actually have is a section on the Church. It is not that Calvin does not value the work of the Spirit, but rather he believes that the Spirit works in and through the Church.

Living Faith 4.3.1 also informs us, *“By the Spirit, Christ calls the church into being and unites us to himself and to each other. The Holy Spirit is in all who know Christ.”*

With that in mind, herein lies the lesson for us, for the church: a heart of generosity by Jesus to draw the circle wide, and a heart of humility by Moses to let God be God.

Too often, we get caught up in the mindset of us versus them, bogged down by petty infighting, by hurts real or imagined. We become territorial like wild dogs marking turfs. We make uninformed assumptions about others, then we wonder why we are often misunderstood. We are quick to judge, slow to forgive, then we go and make grandiose yet narrow statement like ‘if you are not with us then you are against us’.

Whether it be a local congregation divided over the direction of ministry, or it be a denomination divided over the doctrinal issues of human sexuality. Or it be the Church as a whole unsure of its role in reconciliation with the indigenous communities over the dark history of residential schools in Canada.

One thing we cannot forget: **the Spirit of God is always at work, by breaking down and removing the wall of hostility between people, between groups.** Here is what Apostle Paul had to say about Christ Jesus: *“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”* (Ephesians 2:14) Removing the dividing line or breaking down the dividing wall is not an easy work. It is God’s work yes, but it is also our work—individually and collectively.

As we are set to celebrate Holy Communion next Sunday, also known as the World Communion Sunday, let us use this coming week to prepare our hearts. If you have an ongoing dispute with a neighbour, make peace with him in the name of Jesus. If you have not spoken to a long estranged relative, give her a call in the name of Jesus. If a brother or sister in Christ has disagreed with you in some ways, reach out to them in the name of Jesus.

September 30, or this coming Thursday is the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, take some time to reflect and to pray for a true reconciliation between communities and between people, not just with the First Nation, but for all nations, all in the name of Jesus. Wouldn’t you know it, with a blink of an eye, we shall find ourselves surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, proclaiming Hallelujah!

All In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**