

Reality Road: “Who are you for?”

Dear Friends in Christ:

Reality road – a good Lenten theme – and here’s the reality I faced in this year’s sermon assignment: I have never ever preached on the Gospel lesson for this evening’s meditation! Read it before, certainly; deeply studied this text seeking to discover its personal application to the realities of my life – never! But tonight, I have no choice, lest I be fired as Pastor *Emeritus*, delving into the words of Jesus from the Gospel of St. Mark: “*Whoever is not against us is for us.*” (Mark 9:40) But then again, didn’t Jesus also say in Matthew’s Gospel, “*He that is not with me is against me?*” (Matthew 12:30)

So, what’s up Jesus? Now, I’m listening, confronted in those verses by two realities that we all must face. In the context of “*He that is not with me is against me,*” Jesus is teaching His followers that there can be no neutrality when it comes to the battle of sin and Satan and death. To reject Jesus or blaspheme the Holy Spirit means we are on the devil’s side, who is seeking to deceive and drag God’s people into eternal exile; while God sent His Son to invite us to follow Him in a journey of faith that leads to everlasting life!

Thus my question in the sermon title: **Reality Road: “Who are you for?”** How I pray this night that we all are “**for**” Jesus, standing *against* Satan, referred to in the Bible as the “*prince of demons*” and standing up for Jesus, the “*Prince of Peace!*” It’s a life-changing, promise-laden, faith-calling and everlasting-hope statement: “*He that is not with me is against me?*” (Matthew 12:30) **Reality Road...**in your daily life, in your speech and conduct, in your faith and trust: “**Who**

are you for?" Jesus is pretty clear in Matthew's Gospel: "*He that is not with me is against me?*" (Matthew 12:30)

[Pray with me....] *Heavenly Father, forgive us when we follow the ways of this world, rather than placing our trust and hope in your Son Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. May the Holy Spirit fill us and renew us with faith tonight, called to follow you, standing up for Jesus in all that we say and do! Inspire me...and every one of us...to be **FOR YOU...not against You!** Amen.*

Now, in Mark's Gospel tonight, Jesus reframes the verse, saying: "*Whoever is not against us is **for us.***" (Mark 9:40) It's clear in the Lenten journey that once Jesus is revealed as "*the Christ, the Son of God,*" he "*begins to teach [his disciples] that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again*" (Mark 8:27-31). Our Lord's "**reality road**" was set before Him and Jesus was "*on the way...on the road*" to Calvary's Cross!

So, from this point on, until his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus focuses on preparing the disciples for what was ahead. And one of his chief emphases is helping them to **understand discipleship as humble service rather than position and power.*** (Mark 9:33-42; 10:13-31, 35-45). Not an easy reality to embrace, evidenced by the disciples in previous verses who were "*arguing along the way about who was the greatest.*" It's kind of like taking kids on a road trip, oblivious to the destination, upset about which one was going to have to sit in the 3rd row of the van; arguing over who got the iPad first, or who was going to choose the game to play or the movie to watch! And what parent hasn't threatened, "*If you kids don't stop arguing, I'm going to stop this car and...?*" Well, Jesus stops the van, gets out "*on the way,*" sitting his disciples down and teaching them, as we heard in Sunday's message: "*If anyone wants to be first, they must be the very last, and the servant of all.*" (Mark 9:33-35)

But they didn't get it yet; they weren't there yet; focusing on their claim to fame as the first disciples chosen by Jesus; pride and prejudice rearing their ugly heads, John coming to Jesus and whining: *"Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."* (Mark 9:38) Note that John does not say, *"He doesn't follow you (Jesus),"* but *"he doesn't follow US."* It's almost as if John thought these certified, called and ordained 12 have exclusive rights and privileges when it comes to the Name of Jesus! But our Lord never says, *"Come after us"* in Scripture, it's always, *"Come follow me."* (Mark 1:17; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21). John has so missed the mark, making discipleship about them rather than HIM!

So let's get back on that **Reality Road** then as followers of Jesus today, seeking to align our lives to **understand discipleship as humble service**. The first reality teaching is this: Don't ever limit the power and influence of the Name of Jesus. Let the impact of that man who *"cast out demons in the Name of Jesus"* be our encouragement to *"proclaim and live the Word and love of Christ"* as much as possible, to everyone we can! *"Oh Jesus, I'm praying in your name for my friend; Jesus help and strengthen them, provide hope and healing!"* *"Jesus is with you"* and *"Jesus loves you"* can be life-changing moments in people's lives...called by the Holy Spirit to faith and trust in the Savior who went all the way to Calvary's Cross to provide forgiveness and hope, rising on Easter morn promising eternal life to all who believe!

Let's also accept and affirm the reality that the Name of Jesus has power even when spoken by those who are not Lutherans; maybe not even members of a Christian church [yet!] but who have somewhere in their life journey been touched by one of His servant's hearts and lives, words and deeds. If ever there was a time to *"drive out the demons"* of sin and arrogance, fear and hatred, isolation and exclusion it's now! If ever there was a time to share words of

forgiveness and healing, comfort and hope, affirmation and support in the Name of Jesus it's now! If ever there was a time to “*give a cup of water to drink*” to someone in need “*because you belong to Christ*” it's now – our attitudes and actions, our lips and lives a daily witness to the Name of Jesus so that “*every knee would bow and every tongue confess Jesus Christ as Lord!*” (Philippians 2:10)

You see, my friends, once we **understand discipleship as humble service**; then we grasp the deeper meaning of Jesus' teaching: “*For the one who is not against us is for us.*” The “*reward*” which Jesus references in this text is not something earned because of what we do, rather it is the gift received by grace through faith, responding to what He has already done; mission accomplished on that **Reality Road** which led the Savior to Calvary's Cross “*for us!*” (Mark 9:40-41) John ultimately got it, writing in a later epistle: “*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*” (I John 4:10-11) How can we not live **for Jesus**, serving others in His Name, when we comprehend the depths of His love **for us?**” Thus my question as we travel along life's **Reality Road**: “*Who are you for?*” And, to make it really personal, would your family and friends and neighbors, classmates and coworkers know you are “**for Jesus?**”

[Pray with me...] *Heavenly Father, Jesus opens the disciple's eyes to see those who do Your work, which goes far beyond us, showing Your power and kindness through great life-changing miracles and simple cups of water. Lord, thank you for working through the lives of others and lead us to mirror Your mercies in our words and deeds. Inspire me...and every one of us...to be **FOR YOU!** Amen.*

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* Portions of sermon adapted from sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/mark-9:38-50;

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- Prayer adapted from The Lutheran Study Bible, p. 1677;

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