

## ***For or Against***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
September 29, 2024  
Text: Mark 9:38-41

When I made the decision to embark on the second half of my professional life in ministry, I also decided to, in today's vernacular, "go big or go home." I applied to Harvard Divinity School, for a lot of reasons. Chief among them was my belief I would never get in and, if I did, I'd never be able to make it work. So, it would be a way for me to "go big and *stay* home." But, as I appreciate more and more each day, God has a huge sense of humor, so I got in. And I got a free ride plus a stipend, so I literally had no excuse not to go. So, I did and I loved every second of it although my learning curve was huge, in more ways than one.

I was initially confounded by many things not the least of which was the accepted vernacular common to all higher education settings, but reaching a new level at Harvard. I knew this would be the case before I set foot on campus for my first class, if for no other reason than it had been decades since I had last been in a college classroom. Then my fears were realized when the first orientation lecture by the Div School Dean invited us to look around the room to take note of some of the brightest minds in the world now gathered together at Harvard Divinity School to accomplish amazing things. He was talking about the students, not the faculty. Worse, he was right. I was never in a lecture hall with so many incredibly bright people in one place in my life. As you might expect, he explained that Harvard Divinity School is one of the top programs in the world in which to pursue

a Master's of Divinity degree. One of the others is Oxford University in the UK and I don't even remember what he said the second one was because I was already having an anxiety attack. *What the heck am I doing here?* I was thinking as I made plans to duck out at the break. But then, the rest of the Dean's remarks began settling in to my racing brain. He said slowly and deliberately, "if you are in this room now it is because you deserve to be. You have passed through the most rigorous admissions process there is, and you are here because we want you here. You are capable of great things, and we are here to help you figure out what they are and what you need to do and to be to make the contribution to the world we believe you are destined to make." Suddenly I could breathe again. Maybe I wouldn't need to take off at the break. Maybe this would be okay. And it was. I'm my own proof that it was.

One of the things I had to do, though, in those first weeks of class, was to come to grips with the fact that the Academy – any institution of higher learning – has its own vocabulary. Much of it I had no clue about and as a result I missed some things in those early weeks of lectures. That's when I first discovered the wonder of google dictionaries. I started writing down the terms I didn't understand and then I googled them. Now, I had already learned that Google is not a real reliable source for academic work. BUT it is an excellent source for fast and simple definitions of words I had no clue about. There were a lot of them in those early days but probably the one that had the most impact on me – still today – is the term "binary." I had heard that term before, but I always associated it with mathematics or computer science. Like basic computer coding is built on a binary system using "1's" and "0's".

What I learned is that binary has a much more expansive and richer meaning than just that. In the fields of theology and ethics and even biblical studies, binary refers to the belief that every situation, every problem in search of a solution, every analysis in search of interpretation, only has two possible answers. In other words, if you have a binary mindset as you approach any situation, any problem, you will automatically assume that there are only two possible answers. In other words, every answer to every problem comes down to an either/or response. The most important lesson I learned at HDS is that this is seldom if ever the case. Even in theology, ethics and biblical study. Mind blown, right? I know that's how I felt when this first dawned on me.

Here's an example to explain binary thinking. As you think about the rest of your day today, you probably will be thinking about what you will do for lunch after church. Will you eat at home or go out? That's a binary choice. If you go out, will you go someplace that serves brunch or someplace that offers sandwiches? Again a binary choice. Then, after your meal, what will you do? Will you watch the football game (which is itself a perfect example of binary thinking since it pits one team against another to determine which of the two is the better team)? If you don't like football ( thank goodness that I'm not entirely alone here), what will do you? Will it be something inside or outside? Will it be task oriented or relaxing? And so on, and so on.

Binaries dominate our lives and our thinking much more than we even realize. And the decision to move beyond this either/or thinking intentionally is really, really difficult. This I know from experience! But it is also incredibly freeing as your awareness of

the universe of possibilities for life each day grows more and more into your awareness.

Today's text from the Gospel of Mark is a perfect example of a binary situation facing the disciples which Jesus used as a teaching moment for them to learn that there was more than one way to understand the situation they were facing. Yes, Jesus did try to teach the disciples to move away from simple binaries! In today's text, the disciple John came to him to complain that they had seen someone else – not a disciple – “casting out demons” in Jesus' name. Of course John and the other disciples were upset by this, so they told Jesus they tried to stop this other person. But the person wouldn't listen to them. Clearly the disciples were very upset by this and when they brought this to Jesus' attention, they expected him to do something about it. I guess they thought he would want to confront this guy and say something along the lines of “knock it off, faker!” But that's not how Jesus responded to them. Instead Jesus said, much to their surprise I'm sure, “do not stop him.” Then he explains why. He tells them that if someone is doing something in his name, that same person will not be able to speak evil of him. “Whoever is not against us is for us,” he explains. In other words, this is not just a binary situation. It's much bigger than that. Yes, this guy is doing things in Jesus' name when he is not technically a follower of Jesus. That's true, Jesus acknowledges. But, that means this guy is in some way a follower of Jesus even if he's not “official” in the same way John and the other disciples are. And if's he's already a follower, that's a good thing. He won't be criticizing us or speaking ill of us, Jesus explained, and that is just what we need to have happen.

The binary question the disciples posed here is does someone have to be “official” or not in order to do the work of Jesus’ ministry. The disciples emphatically answer “yes,” they do need to be actual, recognizable followers. Or put another way, our little inside group is the only the real deal. Therefore, they should be the only ones trying to cast out demons or heal people in Jesus’ name. NO, Jesus says. That’s wrong because the “real deal” is the message, not who brings it. If this guy, whoever he is, is already living the message, what’s the problem? There is no problem, Jesus explains, except that you disciples want there to be a problem when there isn’t. He makes another attempt to explain it when he says to them, “if someone gives you a drink of water because they know you are my follower, even if they are not one of us, the gift of the water is still a gift. The gratitude for the water is the same, no matter if it comes from one of us or not.

This is one of those truly radical ideas of Jesus that often gets overlooked because it is so very simple, so basic. Jesus is telling the disciples, and us, that we should not get hung up on labels – who is a follower – even the right kind of follower – and who isn’t. That is beside the point Jesus says. What matters is what people do. I think he’s also saying that trying to define who is a follower, especially the right kind of follower, has entirely missed the point of everything Jesus is teaching and doing. If the person is acting from the desire to live as Jesus instructs, then how much more likely is that person to become a follower eventually. Very likely, Jesus would say.

The Franciscan priest and theologian Richard Rohr talks about this very thing in his writings. Interestingly, he frames it within the notion of idolatry. He explains that sometimes we get

so excited about a particular framework for prayer or worship or study for deepening our own faith, we make the leap to then decide it must be the same for everyone else as well. He writes, “too many of us then conclude that this is *the* way, the best way, the superior way, the ‘only’ way for everybody – that I myself just happened to have discovered.” This belief practice then quickly becomes an idol for us that “we must protect ... and spread this exclusive way to others.”<sup>1</sup> He further observes that “we normally have no concrete evidence whatsoever that other people have not also encountered the holy.”<sup>2</sup> He reminds us that “Jesus had no patience with such immaturity and exclusionary religion yet it is common to this day.” Idolatry, he states, “is the only constant and real sin of the entire Hebrew Scriptures and idolatry is *whenever we make something god that is not God.*”<sup>3</sup>

Whenever we make something god that is not God. My goodness, dear ones, how often do we do that? More often than we want to admit I believe. And all too often it is for our own selfish reasons. As the current political season reaches its crescendo with the elections in November this idolatry of one side claiming to be completely right while the other is completely wrong will only grow louder. Are the elections this year high stakes? Yes, absolutely. Are some of the messages we’re hearing from certain politicians scary? Again, yes. Are we really looking at a binary situation – where one side is totally right and the other is totally and unequivocally wrong? No, not likely. In fact, that

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Yes, and ... Daily Meditations*. ©2019 Franciscan Media. p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 121. Italics his.

smacks of the sin of idolatry, no matter which side of the political divide you find yourself on this year. Jesus would instead invite us to consider who is offering kindness and love, like a cup of cool water on a hot and dusty day. Jesus would want us to consider who cares about the well-being of everyone; that everyone has food and water, a home and employment; that old folks and young ones are cared for lovingly, without counting the cost.

For or against. A simple question. A straight up binary, but with a whole lot of context that needs to be explored, understood, prayed over and acted on. May we be led forward not by the idols we make in our need to be right. Instead may we follow the heart of Jesus inviting us to love as we want to be loved, especially now. Amen.