

Whoever Is Not Against Us Is For Us

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, September 25, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Job 42:1-6; Psalm 27:7-14; James 4:13-17; 5:7-11; Mark 9:38-50.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

John and Mary (whose names are fictitious) attended the baptism of their neighbor's child in a Roman Catholic church. Now John and Mary are baptists. They don't believe in infant baptism but they went to the service because their neighbors invited them.

Both John and Mary had been baptized as adults by immersion in a creek on Easter Sunday morning four years ago when Easter came near the end of April and it was a bright, sunny, Spring morning. Up till then they hadn't given much thought about God. Like 85% of the people in the US they believed Jesus was the Son of God but it didn't really make any difference in their life. But it had been a bad winter. John had gotten laid off from work. They'd been arguing and shouting a lot at each other and it seemed like their marriage was falling apart. So out of desperation and hope they both decided to go to church on Palm Sunday four years ago, to a little Baptist church because it was the closest.

The preacher was a powerful yet simple preacher. He wore no gown. He just stood up there with a Bible in his hand, without even a pulpit. He talked about life and death and heaven and hell and how Jesus came to save us from sin and hell and judgment. As Mary listened she was trembling with fear and hope. She'd never felt that way before. At the end of the service the preacher asked people to raise their hands if they wanted to invite Jesus into their hearts. After several moments of inner struggle, Mary raised her hand, not really knowing for sure what this meant or how it would affect her life.

Then the preacher asked those who had raised their hand to come forward if they meant business with God. He reminded them of how Jesus walked from Jerusalem to Calvary carrying a heavy cross and how we should be willing to walk a few feet down the aisle to get right with God. Mary leaned over and told John she was going forward and asked him to go with her. So they both walked down the aisle and knelt. Tears were streaming down Mary's face by now. John felt a little bit embarrassed and confused about what was happening but he also had a warm feeling and thought that maybe this was really going to change their lives as a couple.

The preacher came up to them and led them in a simple prayer. Then he encouraged them to bear witness to their new found faith in Christ by being baptized in the creek next Sunday, Easter Sunday. John and Mary didn't know if they were quite ready for that but the preacher kept on urging them to act on their new found faith. The next Sunday, Easter Sunday, John and Mary decided to go through with it. After the service most of the congregation followed them and the preacher down to the creek. They all sang Gospel songs, "Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb", "I serve a risen Savior, he's in the world today", "Years I spent in vanity and pride, caring not my Lord was crucified." Everybody knew the words by heart. Passers by stopped to watch what was going on. Some kids were mocking and making fun. Well dressed men and women on their way home from church slowed down to see this strange sight.

There was very little ritual or ceremony. The preacher stood there waist deep in the cold water and read the words of Paul about being buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him to newness of life. Then he asked John and Mary to give a word of testimony about how they were converted. Then, after a short prayer, the preacher took each one in turn

and shoved them backward into the cold water baptizing them. Mary came up coughing and spluttering, and then John. The congregation were shouting hallelujah and praise the Lord.

That was four years ago. It was the beginning of a new life for John and Mary. They became involved in every area of that church's life. They carried their Bibles to Sunday School, Church, and Prayer meeting. John even started taking his Bible to work with him after he got a new job. They cut off relationships with many of their old friends who they thought would drag them down and away from Jesus. And they made a lot of new friends in the church.

All they knew of the Christian faith was their little church. They doubted whether friends and neighbors raised in the mainline churches were really Christians. It seemed like there were a lot of nominal Christians; people who went to church because it was the thing to do; people who believed things and said things by rote but who didn't really have a personal relationship with Jesus. Mary would say, "They smoke and drink and go to movies and dances and then they get all dressed up and go to church. What a bunch of hypocrites."

Their suspicions about so-called Christians outside their church were confirmed when they attended the baptism of their neighbors baby at the Catholic church. The priest stood up there wearing a gown, a surplice, a stole. "Who was he trying to impress?", Bill thought. "Where in the Bible does it say that preachers are supposed to wear all that stuff?" And then the priest read his prayers out of a book. "He'd pray from the heart if he were a real Christian, he wouldn't need a book," John thought. Then they heard the priest tell the devil to depart and he breathed into the face of the baby and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." He put salt on the baby's

tongue and the baby started crying. He said that Christians are the salt of the earth and that those who followed Jesus might be called upon to face persecution. He placed a candle in the babies hand. He poured water from a little silver scallop shaped dipper on the head of the baby and said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

"There was hardly enough water to drown a flea", John thought. Then the priest put some oil on the forehead of the baby and held the baby up and said that this child was born again. "That's ridiculous!" John thought.

"What a bunch of hocus-pocus. How could a baby be born again. Why all this rigamarole? A baby can't believe." As they were leaving at the end of the service their neighbors introduced John and Mary to their priest.

The week after the baptism in the Roman Catholic church, John came home early with a terrible headache and a fever. He thought he was coming down with the flu. But after several days of high fever, diarrhea and vomiting he was afraid of dehydration. They went to the emergency room and he was admitted to the hospital. He was diagnosed as having some kind of infection but the doctors didn't know where it was or what was causing it. A week passed and he continued to have a high-fever that sometimes made him delirious.

One afternoon John awoke and saw the priest standing there. He'd been visiting some of his parishioners and, remembering John at the baby's baptism, stopped in to say hello. They talked for awhile and then the priest asked if he could pray for John's healing. John was a little skeptical. He wasn't at all sure that God listens to prayers of Roman Catholics. But politeness won out and he let the priest pray but John didn't close his eyes. The priest placed one hand on John's forehead and lifted the other. He turned his face toward the ceiling as though looking into the

face of God in heaven. And he prayed (without a book this time), "Dear Lord, thank you that Jesus died for us. Thank you that Jesus is risen from the dead. Thank you that Jesus prays for us. Thank you that Jesus has given us your Holy Spirit. And now I ask you to look upon and heal your servant John lying here in this hospital bed. Lord Jesus, as you touched the sick and healed them, touch John and heal him. Give wisdom to doctors and nurses as they continue to minister to him. This we asked through Jesus Christ our Lord." Then the priest said, "You really look hot and thirsty. Here, I'll get you some ice water for your pitcher." After the priest left, John thought, "Not a bad prayer for a Roman Catholic."

That night the fever broke and by next morning John felt great. The doctors said there was no sign of infection, they didn't know exactly what had been wrong, they'd keep him there a while longer for observation and then he could go home. The next day he had the best dinner he'd eaten for a week. He was soon back to work feeling great.

The next time he saw his pastor he told him about the priest's prayer and how he got well. "What do you think of that?" The preacher scratched his head and said, "Well, you know, there's a lot of stuff I don't agree with in the Roman Catholic church; the pope, all those statues of the saints, and prayers to the Virgin Mary. I think a lot of Catholics think they're going to heaven just by doing good works instead of just trusting in Jesus." Then he stopped talking for a moment and thought before he continued, "But, you know, I got a letter from that priest the other day. He's leading a weekend retreat for members of his parish and he asked me to pray for the conversion of his people."

Then John asked, "What are you going to preach about this Sunday?"

The preacher smiled and said, "I was thinking about a passage from the

Gospel of Mark. The place where John says to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we forbade it, because the one who did it was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not forbid such a person; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For whoever is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of cold water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means go unrewarded."

Let us pray: How great is your love, Lord God. There's a wideness in your mercy, like the wideness of the sea; there's a kindness in your justice which is more than liberty. For your love, O God, is broader than the measure of our minds; and your heart, Eternal God, is most wonderfully kind. Amen.