

**WHOEVER IS NOT AGAINST US IS FOR US**

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson  
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**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

We Presbyterians don't always agree on what counts as a sin, but nearly everybody admits *intolerance* as a sin. Intolerance, in fact, is the one sin even the secular world recognizes. Nothing gives the church a worse reputation than the sin of intolerance – intolerance of other religions – intolerance of different ways of worshipping – intolerance of other people. How often I have heard people say, "Jesus is *cool* but the church turns me off. The church is so intolerant." Ninety percent of people living in the United States say they believe in Jesus – but only about 40 percent feel the church is important. Why? Because so many have experienced intolerance in the church. They experience the preaching of the church, not as Good News, but as rejection, exclusion, and judgment. Stop doing this! Stop doing that! Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver's Travels*, long ago wrote this little ditty mocking religious intolerance:

We are God's chosen few,  
All others will be damned;  
There is no place in heaven for you,  
We can't have heaven crammed.

Intolerance is nothing new to the church. From the very beginning Christians have expressed intolerance for those who march to the beat of a different drummer. We see the sin of intolerance in the attitude of the apostle John. John observed an exorcist casting out demons *in the name of Jesus*. "We tried to stop him", John tells Jesus. "Stop casting out demons! You're not properly authorized! You don't even belong to the church." They tried to stop him because, in John's words, "he was not following us." Here's one of the earliest evidences of intolerance in the early church. John reveals a growing tendency on the part of the church to institutionalize miracles; to play the part of a regulatory agency – requiring the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval on good works. It makes me wonder about what's happening today. How do we relate to people who don't follow us?

Something in my own home prompts me to raise this question. Mark has two very good Mormon friends. One, a very attractive girl who has visited our home on a number of occasions and a young man who

could not be a more wholesome friend for Mark – but they're Mormons! They're not one of us. I'm not sure what Mormons believe – but they sure don't follow us. They have a great choir but I don't think they believe in the Holy Trinity – at least, not the way we do. Mormons have strong family values rooted in faith in God but I don't think they believe in salvation by grace through faith in Christ like we do. Early in the history of the Mormon Church, in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, we tried to stop them from practicing their religion because they weren't following us. We persecuted them – we Presbyterians – and forced them to migrate out west where they settled in Salt Lake City, Utah where nobody else wanted to live.

Recently Mark asked for a birthday present - a book written by Gordon Hinkley, the chief prophet of the Mormon church. My first reaction was, "I'm not going to buy him a Mormon book! They're not one of us." I checked the book out on the Internet. One reviewer wrote, "Gordon Hinckley, a 90-year-old ordained leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints believes there's a remedy for America's social ills. Hinckley, quoting extensively from the Bible, presents 10 old-fashioned virtues that include Love, Honesty, Morality, Civility, Learning, Forgiveness, Thrift and Industry, Gratitude, Optimism, and Faith." It sounded pretty good. Hinkley has a lot of good things to say and he certainly says nothing against Jesus *but he doesn't follow us*. I prayed. I asked Jesus what I should do. Jesus said, "Whoever is not against us is for us." So I bought it and gave it to Mark.

Jesus once said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." That sounds very intolerant. He was very exclusive about the source of our salvation. But he was very inclusive about his love and he exhibited a wonderful tolerance for all kinds and sorts of people. He reminds me of something John Lloyd-Ogilvie, the Chaplain of the United States Senate and Presbyterian minister, has said, "Jesus knew that we would earn the right to communicate the exclusiveness of the Kingdom by a loving inclusiveness to those who differ from us. The disciples were the patron saints of narrow sectarianism. They cared little for the man himself who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. But Jesus knew the man was on the way to salvation and did not want him excluded. Greatness will always be marked by an inclusive spirit which loves beyond theological formulations, denominations, political persuasions, and cultural habits." (Paraphrased)

As a Presbyterian Minister, I believe salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. I'm very exclusive when it comes to the source of salvation, healing, freedom, love and every other good gift. No salvation apart from Christ. Yet I'm inclusive as to who God *wants* to save and who God *will* save. Jesus once said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." God works outside the church -- yet we have a longing for all to be one - one flock and one shepherd.

Earlier I quoted a poem by Jonathan Swift where he pokes fun at intolerant Christians who would exclude everybody not like them. Now listen to a short poem by another poet, Edwin Markham, who expresses a more authentically Christian attitude,

He drew a circle that shut me out --  
Rebel, heretic, thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win --  
We drew a circle that took him in.

On the cross, Jesus stretched out his arms to encircle the world in God's unconditional grace and love. On the cross Jesus was excluded - shut out so we might be included in God's family. We come now to the table of the Lord to thank him for his grace. This table is much larger than it looks. There's enough bread and wine on the table to feed the entire world. Jesus once said, "They will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God." So come to the table! The table is big enough for all. Confess sin! Confess our intolerance! We draw circles that shut out those whom God, in Christ, include. Seek reconciliation with those you want excluded from God's grace. Trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal.