19th Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 21) - Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50 - 30 September 2018 - A sermon given by The Rev. Peter A. Munson for the people of St. Ambrose Episcopal Church, Boulder, Colorado

*Whose Side Are You On?*

INTRODUCTION - Sports, God, and Choosing Sides

We see athletes crossing themselves before they bat, saying prayers before and after games. I believe sometimes they are praying that all involved might stay healthy and do their best. What about when they are praying that they would win the game? What does God do with that, especially when both sides are praying? “Hmmm…. I’ll smile down on the Broncos this week, but next week? Nah, I’m going to have to even things out.”

Who is on our side? Is God on our side?

Do you remember picking teams on the playground or on the court or on the baseball field when you were young? Or maybe in high school P.E. class? “God, please don’t let me be picked last!” It might depend on the sport. Baseball, I’d be okay. Football or basketball - I might be picked further toward the end. Picking someone to lead you up Longs Peak? I would have been a good candidate for that. Oh yeah, we didn’t have teams for that in high school.

SITUATION - Whose side are you on?

We have two scriptures today that have to deal with whose side you are on - or who is on your side.

From Psalm 124: If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have been done for! That’s basically what it says. Here is the quote: “If the Lord had not been on our side, when enemies rose up against us; Then would they have swallowed us up alive in their fierce anger toward us…” (Psalm 124:2-3, *The Book of Common Prayer*) It’s actually a Psalm of praise, a song of being thankful for God’s help.

And in Mark, the disciples tried to stop someone who was casting out demons in Jesus’ name, because he was not a follower of Jesus. And Jesus said, “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. Whoever is not against us is for us.” (Mark 9:39-40)

You’re either for us or against us! Jesus is not always this black and white.

There’s something that my wife and I say to each other now and then. Usually the person saying it is reminding both of us, and it’s usually said when we are somewhere in the midst of a conflict. “I’m committed to being your ally.” When one of us says that, it usually shifts the dynamics of the conflict - right then and there. Oh yeah, that’s right, we’re on the same team! We may be disagreeing right now. We may be mad at each other right now. But we’re on the same team, committed to each others welfare. When all is said and done, I remember that no one else has been for me in the way that Julia has been for me. No one. No one, and no one for this length of time - day in and day out for 31+ years. Except God, of course! But I was referring to human beings.

COMPLICATION - Stumbling Blocks

Sometimes, Jesus says, we do things to mess up the side that we are on. In sports they call this “beating yourselves.” Jesus referred to things that make us and others stumble - stumbling blocks. Don’t put a stumbling block in front of a “little one who believes in me” - a newer believer - Jesus says. Better for you to be drowned with the fish than to do that. And what about the things that you and I do that lead to us stumbling? What about the self-destructive things that we do, that take us away from God and take us away from loving others? Prune those things, Jesus says. Don’t literally cut off your hand or your foot or pluck out your eye. Take a look - make a long, honest assessment at what behavior, or what behavior pattern, or what addiction, or which of the seven deadly sins (pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, sloth) is ruining your life, and be willing to let God do some spiritual pruning on you.

The practice of self-examination - honest assessment of ourselves, all of ourselves… strengths, weaknesses, gifts, sins, all of it - has long been recognized as a key Christian discipline. It is related to the discipline of submission - submitting to God’s authority, God’s guidance, God’s pruning.

GOOD NEWS

What is the good news in today’s lessons and liturgy?

I find it first in that same Psalm 124. “Our help is in the Name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.” (verse 8, *The Book of Common Prayer*). God is our helper. God is rooting for us. God is not just with us, but FOR us. God is on our side, not in the sense of being a puppet on a string, not in the sense of wanting our favorite team to win. No. God is on our side in the sense of wanting us to do well, wanting us to be the most loving human beings that we can be.

I find the other good news in today’s Collect - the prayer that we heard at the beginning of our worship. What does our Collect say about God? God’s almighty power is declared chiefly in showing mercy and pity, and that God is a bestower of grace. When we receive God’s grace, we become partakers of God’s heavenly treasure - things like peace and joy and reconciliation and union, things like your particular purpose, your particular saltiness, things like discovering that all of these people sitting with you today are your allies. All of those things are heavenly treasure, and treasure that can be experienced here on earth, too.

NEW BEHAVIOR - We all need allies

You know what? We all need allies. We all need people who are on our side, who believe in us and support us and speak the truth to us and love us - even when we mess up, even when we do stupid things or say stupid things or don’t speak up when we should, even when we get self-absorbed and forget about these people who love us the most.

Whose side are you on? And who is on your side, no matter what? Have you thanked those people recently? Have you thanked them frequently? Have you said to them, in effect, “If you would not have been on my side, I would have been done for - long ago!” Have you said that to God lately? Perhaps that is why you are here today.

It’s not so much that I want God to be on my team. It’s more like I want to go and sit down at God’s feet, and say, “Can I be on YOUR team, Lord? I know that you are the Way. I know that you are the Truth. I know that you are the Life. I know that you will lead me to everything that I truly need. Can I be on your team, Lord?”

Here’s what I know. No one who has ever asked that question of God has ever been turned away. God does not say that only 5 or 9 or 11 or 25 or 53 can be on the team. No. God says to anyone who approaches, “Come on! You’re on the team! Let’s go. I can use you right now. There is someone I want you to speak to over there. There is someone I want you to listen to over there. There is someone I want you to hold over there. There is someone I want you to seek justice for, right over there. Thanks for responding to the call. Thanks for being on my team, and for being willing to be depart from ‘Team I’!”

CONCLUSION

If the Lord had not been on our side… if the Lord had not been for us… I’ll tell you something. I don’t even want to think about how our lives would have gone or what this community would have done.

We pause in this moment to thank you and praise you, Lord Christ.