

“For the one who is not against us is for us.” This is different than the statement that we hear from Jesus elsewhere, from the one that springs to mind—this one is much more inclusive compared to “He who is not with us is against us.”

According to today’s saying, all it takes to be for Jesus and His group, His mission, is to not be against them—there isn’t a high standard of acceptance laid down, there isn’t a bar you must jump over. You simply cannot be working against the mission of Christ.

But who is against Christ? Obviously those who would shut Him up—the pharisees of His day and the Roman government, and today all those who would have Christians silenced. But is that it?

The man whom Christ declares as on their team is yes, not with them as a group. Instead he is clearly working with the same message—that of Jesus Christ for the downtrodden and cast-aside. He is trusting in Christ to bring peace to a person, just as Christ has for him. *He is sharing the sweet name of Jesus who has made his own wounded soul whole, the name which has soothed his sorrow and healed his own wounds, driving out his fear.*

So let’s be clear: Jesus isn’t setting up some universalism; He isn’t saying of the fellow “he doesn’t hate me so he’s not against us” but instead He is saying this man, even though he isn’t lumped in with the twelve, he is demonstrating true faith and trusting me to bring about the peace that I’ve been proclaiming. He is with them, right where he is.

Today, Christians may look and sound different than we expect, being found where we wouldn’t anticipate it, but as long as they have faith in Christ, in the Christ who is both true God and true man, crucified, died and risen for the forgiveness of their sins the assurance of life everlasting, then they are not against us. We might not agree with everything they say, we might not even agree with everything they believe, but, and this might be hard for Lutherans to swallow because doctrine is so important to us, they are nonetheless Christians. Now Jesus isn’t saying that doctrine isn’t important, for much of Scripture highlights the benefit of clear and true teaching, but, in the end as long as doctrine points to Christ, it can create saving faith.

So those who trust in Christ, the true Christ as set forth in Scripture and recalled in our creeds, is not against us but for us. This might be surprising to hear, especially from a Lutheran pastor, but perhaps more surprising to us and to the disciples is when we uncover who is actually against us.

Jesus, in this pericope, puts forth those whom He works against—those who would scandalize a little one, those who would cause them to sin, to stumble, as the Greek has it. Jesus is adamant that those who would work against the faith of a believer are those who are against Him.

So yes, there are those who speak loudly against the church, trying to undermine our beliefs and our doctrine about God and man. Those who would silence our proclamation of the Gospel and instill doubt in believers.

But more so, He is speaking of us. He is warning *the disciples* about causing a little one to stumble—he who wasn't with the 12 is approved for his faith in Christ; the disciples on the other hand are warned of leading the vulnerable, the weak, those of low status—aka all believers, away from Christ.

How do we lead others away?

When we neglect to teach those we've been entrusted with—our children and God-children, visitors, those new to the faith around us. When our bibles remain unopened for weeks on end and when our small catechisms and devotions sit, unshared, to gather dust, we are not sharing the basic truths of our faith, that which will shape the current and future faith of those we're to teach

We can also cause others to stumble when we alter the law of God, lessening it to make those new to the faith feel less bad about something. "Don't worry about it! It wasn't that bad of a thing to do! It's okay." No, it's not okay, but we are to forgive them anyway because Christ has forgiven us. Rather than downplaying sin, we must teach and live the reality of repentance. This cycle is not natural to our world, so kids and those new to the faith must learn it, and we too must be continually retaught it.

Or when we set a bad example—not that we cannot sin in our lives, but the issue is when we do sin and we ignore it rather than own it and confess it, we are setting up stumbling blocks. In this we fail to demonstrate the reality of the Christian life, that of a sinner-saint. Instead, we ought to display the pattern that is now the new Christian's to hold onto and cherish. This means when we are exclusive and unwelcoming, when we're hurtful or living in blatant sin,

we must own it or else we will watch people enter our doors and quickly exit them once again—whether we hurt them in our lack of interaction with them or if we hurt them as they watch our interactions with others, they will not want to be in a place where sin is welcomed and not dealt with.

In all of these, we deserve to be drowned because we are risking the faith of a little one, one whom Christ literally gave His life for and now we are refusing, consciously or not, to cherish and instead are turning them away.

But not only are we a danger to those around us, we are also a danger to ourselves. But how do we lead ourselves away and work against Christ? Well, our text usually reads “if your hand causes you to sin” but the Greek is scandalizes or causes to stumble. Christ is telling us that our own bodily members would seek to break down our own faith. This happens...

When we sin—if we participate in sin, we are welcoming that which aims to steal away our faith. When our hands get messy in that which tempts us, they sin and that one stumble can bring about an entire crumbling of faith.

This scandalizing or stumbling also happens when we journey towards sin or hang around it—we are putting ourselves in danger’s way and playing a game of chicken. Here our feet have brought us to the door to stumbling, to sinning which can all too easily lead to the place where the worm does not die.

We work against Christ and ourselves again when we even look at sin, wishing that it could be ours, wishing it was okay, or despising others who participate in it (likely because we’re jealous and would like to be right there). In these moments the eye is sinning because it allows the mind and our sinful soul to participate in the sin without even lifting a finger, but it can also tip the domino over which causes the feet to start walking to where the hand can start sinning, and at any point we are on the precipice of falling to where the fire is not quenched.

In ALL 3 of these, the offending member ought to be removed because it puts us in real danger, of the destruction that knows no end. But the issue is, if we cut off our hand, we’d learn to use something else to sin or if we plucked out our eyes, our imagination would simply become much sharper.

The reality is, it is our sin that causes us to sin, and so in order to prevent any more sin, to prevent that which would drag us away from faith in Christ, our sin must be removed, but it is so engrained that we cannot do anything but sin.

And so Christ was cut off for us for our sin. He saw pitch black, the darkness of death and His hands and feet were bound and pierced for our sake, the innocent took on our sin, owning it and yet never once participating in it; the righteous taking the punishment and being cast into the place where the fire isn't quenched and the worm doesn't die.

This declaration is like a doctor telling you the diagnosis was incorrect and you are actually in perfect health—you can keep your hand or your leg, your soul, your life. This is why the name of Jesus is sweet to us—it isn't primarily because of who He is or the power that He holds, but instead it is because He gave everything for our sake. This Gospel message is the sweet and satisfying Word to bring us peace—this is the preserving salt that Jesus speaks of in our lesson

The believer, who is supposed to be the salt of the earth, as Jesus declares in the sermon on the mount, are made into His salt; we are given this message that preserves and gives flavour to life, and we are to share it among the nations, near and far. Yet we must be continuously salted, for we lose our saltiness because as Jesus as so vividly pointed out, we work against that which has been done for us.

We are always at risk of losing, or abandoning this salt, so we must return to the source—we must return to the Gospel where we are salted anew each week. Here we are salted like a sacrifice as in the Old testament. Our Christian life of faith is protected—from ourselves and those who would draw us away from Christ—We are cared for and sustained from every attack our flesh might deploy against us and every blow that Satan sends our way. This is the reason why we are able to sin so much and not fall into unbelief—it isn't that we are so great but that Christ is protecting us and calling us back a million times a day.

This is also the reason why we haven't managed to scandalize everyone of our children and every visitor who steps in these doors. He is working against our sinful self and enabling the saint in us to care for those put in our path. And we do not need to claim guilt for all who have stepped away. We are one factor of a million which can work against the faith in those we love—we maybe could have taught them better or loved them more, but even that's no guarantee—Satan, the sinful world, and our own sinful flesh are constantly trying to ruin faith, so please do not heap on all the guilt if someone you've cared for has seemingly lost their faith. But beyond not stealing all the guilt, know that there is hope! When those who have stumbled from the faith, He has not forgotten them but is still chasing after them daily. There is not one individual whom He has neglected, but instead He desires that they know His love.

So we are empowered so that our lives may be sacrificial lives to the good of our neighbour, that they may feel welcome inside the church and in our homes. And so weekly we live in this world, serving our neighbour and sharing the Gospel, weathering the blows of our sinful flesh and Satan himself and then we return to be refreshed by His sure Word and Sacraments. Here in the midst of everyday life we are salted so we may be ready to face the fire of each day, tried and tested with the woes of this world; and God uses these to form our faith and fill out our character so that we may be His hands and feet, throwing His Gospel salt every which way—like salt on a winter sidewalk. By His grace we endure trials and come out the other side changed, and yet it is pertinent that we come back, lest we find ourselves scandalized and stumbling, separated from He who has saved us, saltless and thrown under foot.

And it is through this, the world's tests and our Lord's constant care, that we are tried and preserved, we learn to live together, a Church building each other up in peace, salting each other with the love of God rather than placing stumbling blocks before our fellow believers.