

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A popular movie almost twenty years ago was “Independence Day,” which told the story of what might happen if a hostile alien force invaded earth. Throughout the first part of that film, movie-goers watched as superior alien technology systematically destroyed our planet’s major cities and military installations.

Only a few human resources were left when a weakness was finally discovered in the alien technological armor. With all satellite and radio communications disrupted by the aliens, the earthlings resurrect the old dots and dashes of Morse code, and united the scattered forces around the world for one last strike against the enemy.

The scenes portraying this final unification were very dramatic. Military forces hiding in Russia, China, the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, Australia, Europe and, of course, the United States, all joined together to fight as one people.

The political, ethnic, and even religious divisions that once separated the people of earth into warring nations and clans disappeared in the face of a catastrophic outside threat. The people of earth were forced to admit, under severe threat from a common enemy, that there is more to unite them than there is to divide them.

And Jesus’ words to his disciples in today’s Gospel are certainly apropos to this scene. When it comes right down to it, when all pretense and posturing are removed and we are allowed to be human with each other, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

This, however, is not the mindset of the disciples of Jesus. Somewhere along the way the disciples became aware that an exorcist, someone who was casting out evil spirits, was operating in their area, and was using Jesus’ name.

This exorcist was apparently some sort of freelancer and was not part of the group of disciples. Sensing a threat, or maybe competition, they order this freelance exorcist to stop his activities in the name of Jesus.

This tendency to divide the world into “us vs. them” is very common. The process operates on several levels, some psychological and some sociological. At the psychological level, the disciples may have been dealing with their doubts and uncertainties. They were committed to Jesus, but there was still a lot they didn’t know.

When this new person shows up, and appears to be functioning quite well outside their circle, their insecurities flare into a flame. The disciples are immediately threatened by the knowledge that this competitor may know something they don’t know, or worse, that they might be wrong and the outsider right.

Rather than face these difficult prospects, the disciples simply paint this outsider as a “bad guy” and drive him away. In doing this, they’re operating under the mistaken assumption that “whoever is not with us is against us.” It is the creed of the insecure.

Much of the same dynamic is going on at the group level. The disciples are beginning to forge their identity as a group around their relationship to Jesus, and to each other. They’re building a worldview based on Jesus’ teachings and their responses to that teaching. They are daily forming community rituals and rules that mark them out as “followers of Jesus.”

This outsider, however, is also calling on the name of Jesus, but he’s not following any of their rules. This freelance follower is not observing their carefully crafted disciplines, nor adhering to their insights. He’s found his own way to follow Jesus.

This poses a threat to the disciples. Perhaps they begin to wonder if they’re wrong in their practices. They might also wonder if this freelancer might pose some sort of serious threat to the Jesus movement. His maverick approach might actually serve to diminish what Jesus is doing.

Whatever the thought process, the disciples immediately apply a little “group think” and order the exorcist to cease his activities. And the disciples are clearly pleased with themselves.

They immediately go to Jesus to tell him what they have done. How many times have we seen children run to their parents to tell them what wrong thing a sibling has done? The motive is partly to gain the parents approval. The tattler wants to hear the parent say, “You’re right.”

But if that’s what the disciples wanted to hear, they were sadly disappointed. The worldview Jesus was proclaiming was apparently not as exclusive as they thought. They were wrong in believing that only followers who show their devotion a certain way could have a share in the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ view of the world he was building was much more inclusive. It was so inclusive, in fact, that unless the perceived outsider was absolutely out to destroy the movement, that outsider was considered an ally.

In other words, Jesus’ approach to outsiders was to minimize their outsider status. His interpretation of those who operated outside their little circle was exactly the opposite of the view held by his disciples. Instead of “whoever is not with us is against us,” Jesus taught, “whoever is not against us is for us.” This is the creed of the confident and the trusting.

This adjusted worldview that Jesus provides his followers opens up some interesting questions. For instance, have we made too much of the distinction between the secular and the sacred?

This is not to suggest that we collapse everything into one category or the other. But if we take Jesus' insight out into the world, doesn't it make sense that some of the things that go on that are not in direct opposition to Jesus are for him?

For instance, think about the unofficial partnership that exists in healing and health care between faith and medicine. The great theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, once remarked that he was sometimes intimidated by the power and confidence exuded by physicians.

Doctors enter the room of the sick person armed with knowledge, with sophisticated terminology to explain every nuance of a disease. Doctors are armed with technology and the curative powers of medicines.

Niebuhr said all he had as he stood by the bed of a sick friend was a Bible, or a prayer book, or a Communion kit. The only terminology he had was the language of prayer. And most of that was often spent praying for the doctor to do what the doctor could do.

Niebuhr said he grew to resent the power the doctor held. Patients would quickly brush the pastor aside to hear what the doctor had to say. In the face of the potency of science, faith seemed a paltry thing.

No wonder so many persons of faith in the modern world appear to be pitted against the advance of science.

In many of its applications, many perceive science as an enemy of the faith. But does it really have to be that way? Even scientists today recognize that a healthy body is not the only component of a healthy life. There's also intellectual, financial, occupational, social, emotional, and spiritual health to consider. Science, even with all its technology and medicines, cannot heal the soul.

The doctor performs a great and wonderful service that is not opposed to the work of God. Even if the doctor is an unbeliever, his or her work is part of the general grace with which God blesses our world. If science is not necessarily against us, then following Jesus' line of thinking, it's for us.

There are other applications we might pursue. Public schools, for instance, or even our legal system are sometimes portrayed as antithetical to the faith. There are some in the Christian community who argue if these entities of culture do not affirm faith, then they are working against the faith.

But is that really true? If public schools do their work and educate our children to read and think, that contributes to the work Jesus is doing in our world. It's not the whole work, but neither is it opposed to the work.

If our legal system practices justice and restrains evil so that society might be safe and stable, that contributes to the work God is doing in our world. At least that's what Paul thought when he wrote Romans.

It takes courage to admit that we only hold a piece of the puzzle. It takes courage to admit that others who speak differently about Jesus also hold a piece. And it takes even more courage to let go of our fearful defenses that divide the world between “us and them.”

There’s a common cause to unite us as human beings. There is a calling from God that is big enough to contain all the different pieces we individually hold. There is a unifying principle that can draw all the pieces together into a powerful whole. That principle is this: Whoever is not against us is for us.

Thinking this way puts an end to insider/outsider, “in-group/out-group” thinking. It puts an end, to a large degree, to us versus them. What’s left for us is to recognize that life is a common human enterprise.

Jesus is our model – and we’re trying to be human in the same way Jesus was human – and godly in the same way Jesus was the Son of God. Whatever we find in this world that is opposed to that project, Jesus also opposes. But what we find in our world that advances that cause, the cause of the kingdom of God, Jesus blesses it, and Jesus is in it. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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