

There are a lot of variations to this story. I first heard it from a fellow Air Force Chaplain, a good friend from a small Baptist denomination you have probably never heard. A man who was walking across a bridge and came upon another man standing right on the edge, about to plunge to his death. The first man shouted "*Stop! Are you a Christian?*" "Yes, as a matter of fact I am." "*Well so am I. Are you Catholic or Protestant?*" "I'm Protestant," "*Well so am I. Are you Episcopal or Baptist?*" "I'm Baptist." "*Wow... I am too. Are you Southern Baptist or American Baptist?*" "I'm Southern Baptist," "*Me too, that's amazing! Are you original Southern Baptist or Southern Baptist reformed?*" "I'm Southern Baptist reformed." "*I can't believe it, so am I. But tell me are you Reformed Southern Baptist of the reformation of 1879, or reformed Southern Baptist of the Reformation of 1915?*" He answered, "Reformed Baptist, reformation of 1915." To which the first man said, "*Die you heretic,*" and he pushed him off the bridge.

You could plug any denomination into that tale; I left it Baptist rather than Catholic to avoid any of you getting too focused on the details. It's a story about people who ignore what they have in common but get passionate about details – details that usually aren't nearly important enough to deserve that passion. Are there things worth defending, even dying for? Yes, of course there are, but sadly those usually are **not** the things that guide our daily lives.

Once there was a small rural church that had a major dispute about where the pies should be placed in the kitchen prior to serving them for the annual turkey supper.

One woman actually left that church community because several new comers to the church had convinced the rest of the women working in the kitchen that it would be more efficient to put the pies on the counter beside the sink instead of the counter next to the refrigerator. "*It's not the right way to do it*", she said. "*We've never done it that way before, and I am not going to be part of doing it that way now. Those new people are going to ruin this church. They don't know anything. They aren't even from around here.*" That church was **not** St Ambrose but the story might have sounded uncomfortably familiar?

The apostle John came up to Jesus one day. "Jesus", he said, "I was walking down the road with the rest of the disciples, and we saw someone casting out demons in your name. We tried to stop him because we don't know who he is and because he's not **one of us**. Or was he?"

The issue really come down to identifying this "**US**" or "**OUR WAY**" that someone doesn't match up. Joshua had been Moses right-hand man for years, his closest of companions, but even after all the wonders of the desert experience under Moses leadership he had difficulty seeing how God could do something that wasn't proper procedure. How God's spirit could touch someone who wasn't in Moses presence. It seems that for Joshua the essential thing about the covenant with God was getting to a meeting on time. Was that really essential?

The apostles complained that someone was doing good and speaking in Jesus name and that person wasn't one of their little group. They hadn't learned that the spirit of God moves where it will without any concern for human ordering of a situation.

They had labeled someone an outsider because if you wanted to do good, it had to be their way. Even the closest of followers of Moses or of Jesus had blind spots. God could be at work right in front of them and they couldn't see it. God's word is spoken when anyone speaks up for what is right and true. Any act that reaches out to another, any gesture that gives hope, is God's work being done.

We like to feel in control; we like to think that we have things figured out. So its uncomfortable to deal with a God who shows up in surprising places and doesn't follow our rules. Forty some years ago too many people left the church after the Vatican Council because things they were uncomfortable with change; too many people worry about what Fr. X said to them on a bad day; too many Christian churches spend their time excluding people over countless things that have nothing to do with the message of the gospel or the presence of God with his people.

Throughout the centuries, differing groups of Christians have claimed exclusive access to the true interpretation of scripture or the correct way to practice Christian faith. This is a painfully sad part of our Christian story through the centuries and it must break our Lord's heart to see his people so divided over relatively small matters, when they have so much in common!

We are tempted to assume that if we have found transforming truth on a certain path, that must the normative path that everyone else should follow as well. But Jesus said "***Whoever is not against us is for us.***" Did you catch the way Jesus said that? He did not say, "Whoever is ***not for us*** is against us." Yet that would be the way most of us would categorize humanity.

This way of thinking assumes that most people are different and untrustworthy. Such a world is seen as filled primarily with opponents, competitors, and heretics.

But Jesus offers us a much gentler, kinder, more inclusive way to view the world. He says, “*Whoever is **not against** us is for us.*” So only those who are truly committed to work actively against the cause of God’s Kingdom are truly against us. Unless they have gone to great lengths to make that case unmistakable, we are to assume that everyone else is either now, or soon could be, our ally.

What a difference this perspective makes on the way we see the world, and the way we interact with those around us! All of a sudden the world is filled with companions, friends, and potential allies. The world is saturated with the Spirit of God. We just need to open our eyes to the good that others are doing to savor the presence of the Spirit around us.

So my final words of wisdom today are: **Don’t sweat the small stuff** and I hope that you remember that in comparison with the offer of eternity in the presence of God and his people – everything else is small stuff.