

Jesus was trying to give the disciples one lesson-- just one-- love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And who is my neighbor? Everyone who is not me.

Jesus demonstrated this lesson about love with all kinds of different people: people the disciples expected, and people they certainly did not.

But eventually-- they really thought they were getting this message down. They were doing so well with this, in fact, that they didn't think anyone else could do it quite as well as they did. They were- after all- learning from the master.

So, when they saw that other people-- not those inside Jesus' circle-- but those on the OUTSIDE-- were actually spreading Jesus' message of love, and healing people, and all the rest--without permission-- well, that was just not acceptable. How were they going to control what these others said? How were they going to make sure that they weren't telling it or doing it WRONG??

And Jesus told them to chill out.

No, really. Jesus just looked at them -- being Jesus I'm sure he refrained from rolling his eyes-- and he said, "Look you guys-- whoever is not AGAINST us is FOR us."

That pesky Jesus. Once again he is saying something that makes us shake our heads, and grind our collective teeth.

"What? Whoever is not against us is for us? What about quality control?"

"Chill out," Jesus says. "Stop worrying that people won't do it right or say it right. If they are talking about the overwhelming generosity of God love, and if they are loving everyone with that same generosity--- hey!—those people who are not against us are for us!"

I'm pretty sure there was grumbling from the disciples.

Because, really--we are not comfortable with this even today. I mean-- let the kingdom just happen?? Don't we need to enforce some rules?

We want people to do Christian like we do Christian. Oh—maybe not necessarily in terms of liturgy or traditions, but we certainly want to control the message of Jesus - according to our own sense of right and wrong. Naturally, good Christian families are in. Those that make many good Christian families uncomfortable: desperately poor

people, immigrants, middle easterners, LGBT people: out. They are not following the script.

But Jesus tells us that our attempts at controlling God's message of love are misplaced. Rules for the sake of rules are just not that important. Jesus flagrantly broke the established rules of his own society, all the regular norms of his time-- and make no mistake, many people did not like the message that sent.

But Jesus reiterated to them—and us—that there is only one message: love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and love everyone who isn't you, and love yourself.

But there's another fascinating thing about the reading this morning. This gospel story is told in two very different ways in two different gospels. We've just heard Mark's version. Remember, Mark's gospel was the earliest to be written. Mark has Jesus say: Whoever is not against us is for us. A few short of generations later, Matthew retells this story, but this time the words are different. He has Jesus say: Whoever is not with me is against me.

That's interesting, isn't it?

Personally, I think we Christians tend to be much more familiar and comfortable with Matthew's version.

Many of the most popular novels, most of the action films and 90% of all video games— they're all about defining who the enemy is and then defeating them.

You have to know who's on your side. Who's with me?? Take no prisoners! Whoever is not for us is against us! We really get that 'us against them' stuff.

Somehow-- in the time between when Mark's gospel was written, and the time Matthew's was written, there was an ontological shift: a shift towards a need to control message. A shift towards determining which people were telling the REAL message, and which weren't. It wasn't enough anymore to just love God, everyone who isn't us, and ourselves.

Now not just everyone could spread the word. Women—for example: out. Foreigners: out. People not baptized the right way: out. Whoever is not for us—is against us.

But here's the thing: Jesus was known for saying things that went against the norm. Love your enemies- don't hate them, turn the other cheek- don't react to provocation,

he who is without sin throw the first stone- don't judge others, outcasts are your neighbors.

That's why I think Mark's quote – was probably closer to what Jesus actually said. Why? Because it turns humanity's normal need to control people on its head. Because it's counter to people's normal desire to have people inside the loop, and outside the loop.

Because it's not what we expect.

Chill out-- Jesus says-- don't focus on controlling others so much. Stop talking about loving all people, and start actually loving all people! Think about the freedom Jesus is offering us!

We don't need to be consumed with worry about controlling the kingdom—Jesus assures us that the Spirit will shape it—and has that under control. We only need to focus on loving God and everyone we meet: loving the foreigners, the poor, the disenfranchised, the ill, the lonely, and society's outcast.

After all: those who are not against us-- are for us! Amen.