

The FOR and AGAINST Lists
Lesson: Esther 7:1-6, Mark 9:38-41

Why is it that the world seems to be divided into a FOR or AGAINST List? I'm not all that intense about football - not like a Tea-sip or an Aggie. I went to Baylor when they were losing every game. But I have my loyalties, and they are going to be tested this fall. I have a daughter who graduated from TCU and a son who graduated from West Virginia University. Come Nov. 3rd, put our house on the prayer list. In football, it's hard to be FOR one team and *not* be really AGAINST the other.

It's that way in a lot of life. In fact, we spend most of our time trying to decide if people or organizations or religions or political parties or sports teams are good or bad. If we are FOR one of them, they are good. So we are automatically AGAINST the other.

Jesus tells the followers that you don't have to be against someone who is different just because they are not the same. They might be doing some things that you are all for, but they are just doing them in a different way.

I was an interim pastor of a congregation in Louisville, Kentucky. I started in September and everything was fine. But somewhere in Advent, a few people in the congregation seemed to turn against me. Oh, they were nice enough, like Presbyterians always are. But there was some kind of under-the-surface animosity that I could just feel. Then it dawned on me: Kentucky was playing Duke in basketball that year, and I have a couple of degrees from Duke. It didn't help when Dick Vitale got on national television and said, "I don't understand these Duke haters. They play clean, they all graduate, they are all young men you would want for a son. What's not to love about Duke?" Yes, we were all united in the love of Jesus, but this was different. This was basketball!

I was born a Baptist, I was trained in a Methodist Divinity School where I had Catholic and Presbyterian and Episcopal professors. I learned that there is one church, and what we share in common is more powerful than the reasons the others are wrong. My Christian ethics professor told me more than once: "Whenever you are being forced into an Either / Or choice, you best look for the third and fourth and fifth option that no one else is seeing."

You can root for your team, and still appreciate the other one - even if they do things differently. You can be loyal to your political party and still extend some good will to people who are in the other one. If you're a Presbyterian, you can listen to all the different sides of conversation on the complex issues that face every denomination today, and you can admit that neither side has the full answers yet. In the meantime, it makes more sense that we work together until we work it out. It makes more sense that we take people at their word that they are trying to be faithful to Christ even when they don't take our side on some issue.

The Old Time religion makes the Baptists love the Methodists - and maybe even the Muslims, too. Jesus loves us all, and he died for every-one. The ground at the foot of the cross is

level. In Jesus' eyes, we are all different and we are all the same. Whenever we are tempted to put people on our AGAINST list instead of our FOR list, we need to remember that Jesus didn't have a list.

Jesus goes further than just FOR the same and AGAINST the different. Jesus tells the followers that just because someone is not doing good work like us, we shouldn't dismiss them as bad. Even when we disagree, we don't condemn the other person.

How do we decide what is bad? Well it is the opposite of what is good. And we are good, and the people who agree with us are good, and the people who go to our church are good, and the people who vote like us are good, and ...anyone who does not look like us or think like us or worship like us or believe like us? Well, we wouldn't call them evil, but there has to be something wrong with them. Why do we move so quickly from some *thing* that is bad to some *one* who is *all* bad?

Haman was so sure about being so right about what was good. He saw that Jew Mordicai as a threat to the future even though Mordicai had been the one who saved King Xerxes' life. He was still a foreigner, and not to be trusted. In fact... Mordicai's doing good was all a setup. The Jews were doing good things so they could take over and destroy everything. Mordicai had to be stopped, and Haman devised a scheme to put him in a hangman's noose.

The Pharisees and Sadducees did not agree on much at all. They were the warring parties of 1st century Israel, and they were in a bitter fight for power and control of synagogue and temple and the not-so-civil society. Along comes this man claiming to be the leader and ruler that God had promised since the dreams of Isaiah four centuries ago. He wasn't the first to make the claim, but he seemed to be gaining traction with people of all kinds - even those dirty "unclean" ones they treated as outcasts.

Jesus was on the AGAINST list of the Pharisees and the Sadduces. Jesus was not the only one who felt the opposition of the these powers of the day. The followers themselves were identified with him and labeled as people to watch closely. They felt attacked, they felt cornered, and my guess is that they were looking suspiciously at anyone who came their direction and looked different.

Look what the followers did! They turn around and do the same thing to someone else! "Jesus, what are you going to do to stop these people who are doing good and giving you the credit for it, when you don't even know who they are or what their motives are? If they aren't with us, they are against us!"

They did it because they were afraid, because they assumed they were right, because they wanted to be first, because they thought they were on Jesus' FOR list. Jesus tells them that his FOR list is a lot longer than they can imagine. Maybe that is what really scared them.

Jesus did not spend much time being against anyone. Jesus has a cure for our tendency to fear difference and label what we do not understand or disagree with as bad. He says, "Treat other people the way you want to be treated."

It was not the popular way in his day. It's not popular now in ours - or in our own lives a good bit of the time. We are too often in the "Treat people the way they treat you" camp. And I hate to tell you, but if we are busy dismissing people, or name-calling people, or being against people, then we are more like the people we are against than we are like the man who is always for all of us - even when we are against him.

Here's the thing: you can say you have to stand up to evil, you have to be strong against your enemies and all that love and kindness stuff doesn't work with them. But the truth is we don't really know it doesn't work, because we don't try it all that often, and we don't stick with it very well when we do.

Jesus goes a step further, and he requires us to walk the same steps with him: Jesus says that even when someone is not with us, even when they look evil to us and everyone - even when they are enemies - we should *not* put them on an AGAINST list. We should pray FOR our enemies. "Love your enemies. Do good to the people who persecute you."

Think of it this way: Jesus says we should pray FOR our AGAINST list. Let's think of things we are against - some people or causes or factions or nations or churches [gosh, there are lots of possibilities], ...and move them over to the "pray for" list.

It is hard to pray for the people we are against. I think that is one reason we don't pray all that much, and we have a pretty small reach with our prayers. We pray mostly for our friends and loved ones, or for the people who are on our side and therefore on our pray FOR list.

Prayer is a teaching tool for us. When we pray like Jesus did, it is harder for us to live the way we live. Prayer teaches us, gives us the courage to put our praying into our doing. After all, Jesus taught us to pray that his will would be done on earth, and how is that going to happen if we find excuses not to live his will. It is really hard for us to pray one way and live another.

Here is the bottom line: Jesus says we are supposed to follow him. Jesus says that what other people think or say or do to us never changes the way we live with them. We live with other people the way Jesus lived with them.

And that means that we throw away both lists, and love others the way that Jesus loved us. That was the new commandment he gave to followers the night before he died for everyone, and it is still worth living - in our living with everyone.