Sunday, October 31, 1982
FOR WHAT? AGAINST WHAT?
Mark 9:38-41; Luke 9:51-56

The Gospels tell us that one day the disciples of Jesus discovered an individual who was casting out demons, healing people in the name of JESUS. They didn't like it. They were against it. This man was not one of their group. He had not received their official approval, so they told Jesus that they had stopped the man. But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him;" and he want on to say, "he or she that is not against us is for us."

Before we look at this incident further, let's make a distinction in this matter of being for or against something.

We may object to a thing for two different reasons. On the one hand, we may object to it because of what it is. On the other hand, we may object to it because of what it is. On the other hand, we may object to it because it isn't what it ought to be. In other words, we may object to a thing because of its nature; or we might object because it isn't living up to its nature.

Here's an example. A person may be against, implacably opposed to liquor. Not because it is bad liquor, or inferior liquor, but simply because it is liquor. Good or bad; Jack Daniels or moonshine, that person is against liquor. On the other hand, a person may be opposed to what he or she considers to be poor quality liquor, but not liquor in itself.

To change the illustration, I suppose most of us are opposed to dictatorship as such. We would be opposed to it whether the dictatorship is good or bad because that kind of government deprives human beings of choosing for themselves who is to govern.

But we are not opposed to government as such. We recognize the need for government of some kind. We may criticize and strenuously work to throw out some government because we do not approve of its foreign policy or economic strategy, its aims of lack of aims, but we would rather have inefficient government than no government at all. We cannot live in a state of anarchy. Thus, we are for government, but we are against particular forms of government.

We are also of love of country, but we know there is a different between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism is wanting what is best for your country. Nationalism is thinking your country is best or always right no matter what it does.

Patriotism means asking your country to conform to the highest laws of our nature, to the eternal standards of justice and equality. Nationalism means not criticizing or trying to change your country even when it violates these eternal standards. Patriotism is a form of faith; nationalism is a form of superstitions, of fanaticism, of idolatry. It's important to know what we are for and what we are against and the reasons why.

In the 1960s and 1970s, we heard the unfortunate phrase, "America: Love it or Leave it." It was an unfortunate phrase because what many people meant by it was, "Don't criticize your country — just leave it." But most people who want to change conditions do like it here. They love it here and they love their country. They love it so much that they cannot stand to see it suffer from its imperfections and want it to live up to its ideals.

It is the people who placidly accept the corruptions and perversions and inequities in our society who do not love America — they love only their status and security and special privilege. We not only have a right, we have a responsibility to make our environment as just and as flourishing as our Founding Fathers and Mothers declared it must be if it were to live up to its aspiration as the “standard of the world.”

Such distinctions are important when we’re deciding what we are for and what we are against. Too many people today are muddles about what it is they really object to. So, they blow hot or cold. Sometimes it’s not the thin in itself, sometimes it’s the perversion of the thing. And so, they’re not very effective critics, because they’re not clear on the target.

Another example: a favorite target in many quarters today is the “system,” the “establishment.” There are big, general words that include everything from private enterprise to bureaucracy, form classroom examinations to computers, from machine made pollution to machine salvation.

One reason for the ineffectiveness of this protest is that it’s not consistent. Some days it seems to be directed against the whole works, that is anything that is organized, mechanical, technological, impersonal or related to a government agency.

Rhetorically we speak of being against the “system,” but what we’re really against is any perversion or misuse of the system.

When the disciples stopped the individual who was doing the same kind of work they were doing, but without their stamp of approval, they were at first unclear as to why they were against this man. They just knew they didn’t like it. Surely, they were not against the good work he was doing, the help he was giving to people, but they did not make that distinction.

Jesus said to them, “Do not forbid him, for he that is not against us is for us.” These words are a rebuke to all our blind exclusiveness, our arrogant assumptions that God’s action in the world is limited to the forms and the people with which we are familiar. Sometimes, like the disciples, we spend too much time building fences of exclusiveness rather than paths and doorways of inclusiveness. We’re against something before we think it through.

The followers of Jesus are not to be a little clique off in a corner, fenced in by a hedge of thorns. Jesus tells us not to look for labels. Rather look for actions, attitudes, spirit.

In another episode in the New Testament, we find the Pharisees and other criticizing Jesus for healing a person on the Sabbath. What were they against? Surely, they weren’t against healing! No, they claimed they were against healing on the Sabbath, because it broke one of the laws. Then Jesus had to remind them that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath. In a similar way we could say the systems of the world are here to help us, rather than us being made to serve the systems. It’s an important distinction.

Let’s carry the matter further. We would all say that we are for the good and against evil. But what is evil? What is it that we are against?

Last Sunday, I pointed out that we usually define love too narrowly and ordinarily think of it only in terms of one-to-one personal relationships. That limits us in our understanding and practice of love.

So too, we can make the mistake of defining evil or sin too narrowly. We may think of it only in personal terms. Once in a while on an early Sunday morning before coming here to prepare for the worship service I will turn on the television and hear an evangelist. Most of the time the message is basically the same and evil or sin is defined and described only in personal terms — things like drunkenness, using drugs, sexual infidelity, stealing and telling lies.

Now certainly such things are wrong, but if we limit our understanding of evil or sin only to personal wrongdoings, we are in danger of being self-righteous because we can tell ourselves that we don't do such things. We have a tendency anyway to define sin as those things we don't do and that others to do. Then it's easy to be against sin and evil.

But evil or sin is more than personal. It is also social. Not too many years ago the newspapers were full of the exploits of a man in Texas, know as Billy Sol Estes. He was a friend of people in power, and he prided himself on his personal morality. He claimed he was so moral and righteous that he would not even allow males and females to swim in his private pool at the same time lest they be tempted. At the same time, however, he was found to be cheating the U.S. government out of millions of dollars in a grain swindle. He understood evil only in personal terms, and thus continued to think of himself as a highly moral individual.

It often happens too that as individuals we do our best to be morally right and to be against evil, but at the same time are part of a system that is evil in itself. The other day I came across the story of a black man who recalled that when he was about ten years old, a good friend of his father's was accused of looking funny at a white woman. A mob got together, tied him to a wagon, and after dragging him through the streets, he was hung up on a tree and shot full of holes. No one was ever arrested. The writer went on to say that all of these people as individuals were kind, loving persons. They were for justice and against injustice but could not see anything wrong in their own involvement in the mob action.

Shortly after World War II, the editors of a leading Protestant denominational magazine decided that they would designate and honor some American political leader as "Christian Statesman of the Year." After searching the national scene and their own souls, the magazine selected the governor of a southern state, a man notorious for his practice and support of racial discrimination. The editors explained, however, their choice in these terms: "The governor neither smokes or drinks and will not serve liquor in the official residence."

Evil or sin is personal, but it is also much more than personal, yet we continue to be against personal sin more than social evil. Maybe that's why we hear a lot about individuals who are welfare cheaters. But if cheating or fraud can be on a large enough scale such as a company padding a government contract, then it's more difficult for us to deal with.

Most of us would not personally discriminate against anyone, but we can be part of a system that discriminates, and we are often not even aware of it, or deny it.

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote: "We cannot build our individual ladders to heaven and leave the total human enterprise unredeemed of its excesses and corruptions. For the church and individuals to urge kindness to our brothers and sisters, one by one, while ignoring social structures that damn them all in all, is to be irrelevant to our society and unfaithful to the fullness of the Gospel."

Jesus Christ was for people, and he could at the same time be against their behavior or their actions. He knew that institutions as well as individuals were capable of evil. So, he was for the institution but against its misuse.

Today throughout the Protestant Church we celebrate Reformation Sunday, because on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, his criticisms of the church of the day. Luther was for the church which he loved, but he was against some of practices, and he was careful to make that distinction. He wanted the church to live up to its true nature, to be what it was called to be.

As Christians we are called to be against that which is destructive of human life, and we are to be for those things which enhance and add to life. And being against something which we do not like in a constructive and helpful way is not very easy. In our second scripture reading for this morning, we are told that the disciples in their dislike of the Samaritans wanted Jesus to call down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritans. They were unhappy because the Samaritans would not receive Jesus. The answer to what they were against was to destroy it.

Jesus, however, rebuked them. He knew that to destroy the Samaritans who had not received him would solve no problems, but only create more.

So, we not only have to make careful distinctions as to what we are for and what we are against and why, but once we have made those distinctions, we have to act on them in constructive and helpful ways. Amen.