

## **Tell Me What You're For**

We Christians don't always get a good rep. One reason is that many Christians spend a lot of time talking very loudly about what we are against.

We're against that political party.

We're against that belief.

We're against that group of people.

But what are we for?

Let me tell you a story...I grew up in a family that went to church a lot. And in the church I grew up in, there was a man who was a pillar of the church who sat in the pew just across the aisle from where I sat with my parents. His name was Blo Leight and he was the postmaster of our small town post office and a core leader in the church. He was also very nice to me. He'd always greet me, "How's it going big guy." He'd ask me about my baseball team. But one day, I learned that he was an Auburn football fan.

Now that may not mean a whole lot to you but if you're from Alabama, you have to pick sides. You are either for Alabama or you are for Auburn and there's no middle ground. If you move to the state, it's made very clear to you that you better pick a side.

My family and I were Alabama fans and I loved Alabama football. I had the whole football outfit. My brother and I would put on our red jerseys and our toy football helmets and go outside and spend hours pretending like we were playing for the Crimson Tide.

And then one Sunday, during football season, I walked into church – I was maybe 7 or 8 years old – and Mr. Blo came up to pad me on the back and say, "hey big guy," and do you know what he was wearing – an Auburn football tie.

I was beside myself. I knew I liked Mr. Blo but I knew I didn't like Auburn. So I thought I'd give him a chance to redeem himself. "Mr. Blo," I said, "are you an Auburn fan."

"Yes, sir," he told me.

I said, "I have an idea. You root for Alabama when they're not playing for Auburn and I'll root for Auburn when they're not playing Alabama."

"Oh, no son, I can't do that. I'll never root for Alabama," he told me. Now he thought we were just having good fun. But I didn't think it was funny. I was hurt and I was mad.

For the entire church service, I glared at Mr. Blo. It wasn't hard for him to realize that I was upset since I was staring at him for the entire service, so as soon as the preacher said the benediction, he walked over to me and said, "Now I'm an Auburn fan, but I'm also a fan of you. And so if it helps you feel better, I'll root for Alabama when they don't play Auburn."

You see, Blo Leith understood that him being against Alabama's football team made me feel like he was against me. And he wanted to make sure that I knew that he was always going to be for me, even if that meant he had to be for Alabama every now and then.

Today is my Vision sermon. And if I could sum up in one sentence what my hope and vision is for our church it is that we can define ourselves by what we are for and not by what we are against.

I hope we are a church who, first and foremost, is for Jesus...and for the things Jesus stood for. We are for peacemaking and social justice. We are for worship and prayer. We are for feeding the hungry and caring for those in need. We are for building inclusive community. And more than anything, we are for radical, unconditional love – love for our friends and family members, love for our fellow church members, love for ourselves, and even love for our enemies. We are for these things because Jesus was for these things and Jesus is our way, our truth, and our life.

Let's look a little deeper at this part of scripture and familiar Christian proclamation.

Our Scripture today is an example of one that Christians have used over and over again to talk about what they're *against*.

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," Jesus tells the disciples.

Time and again, I've heard Christians use this exact verse to talk about what they're against.

Against people of other faith traditions.

Against people who don't believe the same thing we do.

Against them...because no one comes to God except through Jesus, or so we've heard.

This chapter in the gospel of John is a long section in the gospel that takes place on Jesus' last night with the disciples before he is arrested. The next day he will be crucified. On this same night that Jesus says these words to the disciples, he had already washed their feet, he will offer them the very first Communion, they will go out to the garden and Judas will betray them. Then, every one of these people at this gathering with Jesus will either run away or deny they knew him. They didn't know it at the time, but this night would be the hardest night of their lives.

The one that they had placed all of their hopes in would soon be killed.

Each of them would, in one way or another, fail Jesus in the moment he needed them most.

Everything that had given their lives meaning and purpose for the last three years was about to be shattered and all of them were going to feel like a coward, like a failure. They were about to be devastated.

Imagine you're in that situation. When the world feels like it is falling apart all around you, what reassurance would you need?

Jesus had *one final message* to share with this group of people before their world fell apart.

What message did he think they needed to hear?

In that moment in time, do we really think what Jesus was saying to them is, "By the way, I know your whole world is about to fall apart but let me tell you why you should be against Buddhism."

No, of course not. Think about those times when your world has felt like it was falling apart. What did you need? I imagine it wasn't a reminder of what you're against. No, in these times, we want to know that we're not alone. We want to know that everything was not—is not—in vain. We want to know that, somehow, life can still go on.

And so Jesus addresses the disciples knowing that the worst was about to happen and he chooses to use the language of love. Now, the language of love often uses the language of absolutes.

For example, I'm sure Doug would say that Betsy is the most amazing woman in the entire world. That is 100% true in his eyes. But my guess is that none of the other women here today would be offended by him saying that. Doug is speaking about what Betsy means to him. He is speaking *his* truth. For him, she is the best woman in the world.

This is exactly what Jesus is doing in this moment. He is reminding his disciples that he loves them using the language of love—the language of absolutes. It's like he's saying,

"Tonight when your whole world feels like it's falling apart, remember that I love you. Remember that I am your way, your truth, your life and nothing can change that. Not arrest, not crucifixion, not death. In fact, when I leave you, I'm going to prepare a place for you. One way or another, we'll always be together. *I love you.*"

Jesus wasn't telling them what to be against. He was telling them that everything they had given their life to over the last three years wasn't a lost cause. He was still the way, the truth, and the life.

Because we live in love, we are not against any being when we've chosen to walk in the way of Jesus. Love may be against movements and ideas—love is against hate, against violence, against oppression—but love is never against life and living beings. Precisely because we are for love we must be a community that is never against anyone.

That's my greatest hope for our church. And that's the hope that I heard solidified in our Vision Statement—we are an open Christian community for all—not for some, but for all—to belong, to grow, and to engage. And this morning, I want us to think a little more about what it truly means to be a place where all can belong because if we can get that part right, then I think the rest will inevitably follow.

How amazing would it be that whoever became a part of our community, that they felt like they really belonged?

Maybe it's someone who is struggling to find a job and they are worried about how they're going to make it – and we tell them, you belong here.

Maybe it's someone who has devoted their whole life to their work to the neglect of their children and are wondering if they can find healing with us – and we tell them, you belong here.

Maybe it's someone who is queer or trans and they wonder if there's a faith community that will honor and accept them for who they are -- and we tell them, you belong here.

Maybe it's someone who is divorced and worried they won't fit in – and we tell them, you belong here.

Maybe it's someone who just received a devastating medical diagnosis, and what do we say? *You belong here.*

Last week, our executive conference minister challenged us to believe that we can be a place where we can be changed, where whoever walks through our doors can be changed. We are changed precisely because we are radically accepted for who we are.

All can belong because we aren't against anyone. We're for them because we are for love, because we are for Jesus.

Now my guess is that we all believe this. My guess is that all of us deep down want to be a place where all belong and the kind of church that defines itself by what we're for. But let me offer a word of caution for us.

Sometimes it is easy to start being against without even realizing it. We are not a church that would ever intentionally say we are against anybody, but sometimes creating a community of belonging means we do things differently than before or even do things that seem a little weird. Sometimes it means an Auburn fan like Blo Leith has to just for a moment stop hating Alabama so an 8 year old boy feels like he belongs.

And when we have to do things that make us feel a little uncomfortable so someone else can belong, it's easy for even the most inclusive churches to say things like:

"Well, that's not how we used to do it."

Or, "Isn't that a little overkill."

And before we know it, our whole experience at church can be focused on resisting what's happening rather than leaning into how we can become a place of even greater belonging. Now let me be clear, I'm not saying you shouldn't speak up when you disagree with something. I'm not saying you shouldn't offer constructive feedback and criticism when it's called for. But what I am saying is that let's never lose sight of how important it is to also find things we are for, things that we are excited about.

I want to end by making two promises to you and one ask of you. First, my promises. If I become your settled pastor, there will be times when I disappoint you. There will be times when I make mistakes. There will be times I do something or say something you disagree with.

And my second promise is in a similar vein. There will be times when the church decides to do something or a committee decides to do something that you disagree with. You won't find everything we do to be your thing. No one (or at least very few people) are going to resonate with every single thing we do.

Rabbi Benjamin of Congregation of Beth Shalom led his synagogue through a visioning process a few years ago and he gave a speech entitled, "Dissatisfaction guaranteed." His point is that being a part of a faith community inevitably means that there will be times when you are dissatisfied, times when you wish we had done things differently, times when you disagree with something.

And now for my ask. When you find yourself in that space, absolutely speak up, absolutely offer constructive criticism and feedback. We need that. But don't spend the majority of your time in church thinking about or talking about what you're against. Instead, give yourself to something you're for – whether it's singing in the choir or planning or hosting coffee hour or doing a service project or helping to plan worship or serving on a committee or volunteering with Sunday school or youth group or joining a small group or visiting those who are sick or homebound. You see, just as I can promise you that no one is going to resonate with every

single thing we do, I believe that every single one of us can deeply resonate with *something* that we do. Find what that is and give yourself to that.

Tell me what you're for and let's do that together.

And more than anything, let's remember that we do this because we are for Jesus. If we are for Jesus, then we are for everybody and we are for this church. We choose to lean into what we are for in this incredible church community rather than those things we are against. And if we can choose to define ourselves in this way, then I promise you we will be walking down a way that is very impactful, we will be leaning into truth that is very deep, and we will be choosing a life that is so full.

### Prayers of the People

Candice's nephew died by suicide

Lorna's husband Ed battling cancer

Allen, Texas

This table is God's invitation to each of us. It's an invitation that says, "You belong." On the night before he would be killed, Jesus gathered with his friends for one final meal. If there was ever a time he might have focused solely on himself, this would have been it – no one would blame him. But that's not what he did. He washed the disciples' feet. He served as their dinner host. And then he took bread and wine, blessed it, and gave it to his disciples and said, "This is my body. This is my blood. Given for you." At the table, we are reminded that Jesus gave everything he had for our sake.

And then he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." He invited the disciples and he invites us to participate in the same acts of radical hospitality that he offered us. We remember Jesus by setting a table where all belong. We remember Jesus by giving of ourselves to serve those around us. We remember Jesus when we sit down with friends and enemies and everyone in between to share a common meal and to recognize our common humanity.

As we receive from this table, let's remember that we all belong, we are all loved, and we are all included at God's great feast and we are called to make sure everyone knows that they too belong, they too are loved, and they too are included.

Let us Pray: Pour out your Holy Spirit on these gifts of bread and juice. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we might be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by his love. Amen.

Friends, when we break the bread, we are sharing in the body of Christ. Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one.

And when we share together from the cup, it is a means of sharing in the love of Christ offered to all of us.

As our servers come forward, I want to let you know that the bread is gluten free and the juice is non-alcoholic grape juice so there are no barriers for anyone who wants to receive. You don't have to be a member of this church or any church to receive Communion here. This is God's table, and that means you are all welcome to receive.