

Pentecost 17A + October 1, 2017

Philippians 2:1-13

Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI

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Our culture thrives on labels, even when some of us don't fully know what they mean: Grain-fed or grass-fed. Organic or non-GMO. All-natural. Free range.

We especially like labeling people. Liberal, conservative. Working mom, stay-at-home-mom. These labels can become our identity in the In the eyes of others: Gay or straight. ELCA, LCMS, WELS, or maybe even Presbyterian. Gluten-free. "Oh, are you gluten-free?" as if this reveals some deep secret.

Labels are useful in identifying characteristics, but taken to another level they can become sources of division. It's becoming increasingly clear that we live in a dangerously divisive age. And it's our national anthem, for goodness' sake, that has become the latest catalyst of division. The national anthem is the most unity-building expression that our country possesses. Yet at all NFL games last Sunday, and at the Packers/Bears game on Thursday, it had the opposite effect. The New York Times has published national anthem photos from each one of these games. The impression these gave was the unthinkable: NFL fans dead set against their very own teams. The players were making a unified gesture, to which large percentage of fans were demonstrating their clear opposition. If football really is a religion, then people were rejecting their gods.

As often happens when a mass mentality takes over, the original purpose of the protest was largely lost—an attempt by former 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick to call attention to racial inequality and injustice. On Sunday, though, many teams were mostly taking a stand

against divisive comments made by President Trump that any athlete who knelt during the national anthem was disrespecting the flag, and that any NFL player who did this should be fired. The Packer Players' thoughtful statement before Thursday's game went deeper. They asked fans to link arms to show "that that individuals from different backgrounds and with different life experiences can work together toward a common goal" and that we are all woven of the same cloth. But TV cameras showed angry fans pumping their fists into the air and defiantly holding oversized flags. Perhaps they agreed with Trump, or perhaps they simply resented any kind of protest intruding on the sacred ritual of football. At any rate, few fans linked arms.

Far more serious for our country are the seeds of division that we now know were sown on Facebook by Russian operatives. Thousands of ads were placed and distributed specifically to heighten tensions that already existed between various groups, mostly concerning race, and further pitting these groups against one another through false and inflammatory statements. Their purpose was to create chaos, and in the long run to undermine America's leading stature in the world as a great democracy. This is an old Cold War tactic by the Russians, but we're now discovering how they have perfected these tools of division for the modern age.

With all this, we must remember that divisiveness succeeds only to the extent that people allow themselves to fall prey to such partisan discourse. Taking a stand on any issue is a matter of choice. Many NFL players chose to stand against Trump and his divisive comments. Many NFL fans chose to stand with Trump and their country in what they perceived to be an attack on American patriotism. Yet the players might say they were being deeply patriotic in standing up for equality and justice—liberty and justice for all. How do we decide where to stand? If you really stop to listen to everybody's opinions, does it simply become overwhelming?

Thanks be to God that the Apostle Paul provides us with an absolute rule, a litmus test if you will, for just this purpose. We find it throughout the gospels in Jesus' own words, but especially here especially in 2 Philippians, where Paul describes how the church in Philippi can make his joy complete:

...be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

As Christians, for the sake of the world, we are called to live beyond pride, beyond concern only for ourselves and our little empires. God calls us to this in whatever way our situations and gifts make possible. Our mission is to help bring in God's kingdom, which Jesus has announced—a world where things operate according to God's will instead of according to the will of humans who are alienated from God.

And why don't we simply take care of ourselves and wave our troubled world away? Here is a corollary: Because if we were created in the image of God, as Genesis 1 says, and if Jesus is the very image of the unseen God, as Colossians 1 says, then we human beings are the very image of Jesus Christ, who lived and died as a servant of God's love for the world.

Paul pleads with us:

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Jesus' death was his ultimate choice of giving for the sake of the world, that through his resurrection we are freed to live according to his new commandment: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Now that we are free from bondage to sin and death, nothing can keep us from doing that!

Our gospel reading today reminds us that Jesus is the source of all authority, and furthermore that if you realize that you have been captive to some other god – the god of hate, the god of selfish pride and arrogance—that it's OK to change your mind, to turn around, just like the son did who first refused to work in the vineyard but then agreed to go. And when we do turn to God, everything becomes clear: Paul says: "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

AMEN.