

October 1, 2017
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The Cross, the Flag, Standing and Kneeling

Let's look a little closer at the today's reading from Philippians, (2:1-13) a letter of Paul when he was in prison to a community that was in distress. No one is quite certain what was dividing the Christian believers in this ancient city -- some of them may have felt forgotten or ignored by the apostle. Yet Paul knew something true then as it is today: when a community feels threatened or insecure they can quickly start behaving in destructive ways towards one another. So, Paul urged unity over division: "be of the same mind, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not at your own interests, but to the interests of other."

Why do those words seem so appropriate for us to hear and echo today -- in our communities, our nation, our world? We hear it so often that a narrative is settling in. We are more divided now than ever. People live in their own bubbles and do not engage in real conversation with others with whom they may not agree. We hear of people feeling threatened, forgotten, attacked, marginalized, labeled, stereotyped, is there any guidance from the Scripture for us?

Let's take this past week for example.

The watercooler in America is a place -- a metaphor even -- where people come together to discuss everyday life and events. Co-workers might share what they did last weekend or give their take about who got voted off on "Dancing with the Stars." In some parts of the country the barber shop is that kind of place, or the beauty parlor, the local McDonalds or diner -- or the Rotary Club meeting. News, controversies, scandals, a little gossip thrown in -- they merge at places where people gather, listen and talk.

If one gathered around that proverbial watercooler this past week, there was probably one dominant topic of conversation. Sadly, in my opinion, it may not have been the devastation in Puerto Rico and the growing humanitarian crisis unfolding in this U.S. territory. Rather it seemed that many were talking about what NFL football players were doing or not doing during the singing of the National Anthem before last Sunday's games.

This all began more than a year ago when one player, Colin Kapaernick, took a knee during the playing of the Anthem to call attention to racial injustice -- specifically police shootings of black men. The controversy exploded when politics and sport converged, as the President weighted into the issue. We saw entire NFL teams locking arms during the singing of the National Anthem played before the games, while some players took a knee.

Sports have long been seen, or perhaps idealized, as that one place in American life where people could come together to root for their team -- celebrate victories or agonize defeats -- together. Last Sunday our divided country seemed even more so, with fans and players taking sides, cheering some and booing others. It was a mess. What are you and I to make of all of this?

Christians know a few things about symbols and gestures. As Episcopalians, we certainly do a lot of standing, sitting, bowing, and kneeling – ‘pew aerobics’ as the late Robin Williams called it. When we sing hymns we stand, when we listen to preachers and Scripture we sit, and we confess our sins we kneel. This nothing new. (Ps 95:6-7) O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker!

Many take on the practice as bowing in front of the altar as a gesture of honor and reverence for what we believe takes place in this space: bread and wine becoming the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Some, especially if raised Roman Catholic, still genuflect – bending or touching one knee to the floor – as a gesture of worship and reverence.

Symbols are powerful. They represent and define what words cannot fully describe.

The main symbol of our faith is, of course, the cross. Yet even this sacred symbol of the Christian faith – representing the death of Jesus to take away the sin of the world and leading to his Resurrection -- is not exclusively our own. The cross is worn as a fashion accessory by rock stars and fashion models. It is painted, tattooed, sculpted by people of great, little or no faith. I think of the haunting images of the rows and rows of white crosses at Arlington National Cemetery and Omaha Beach in Normandy France. I conjure up images of the K.K.K. setting crosses on fire in fields or in front of the home of those they want to threaten or intimidate.

Symbols, as powerful as they can be, are not always the property of those who most believe in and care about them. I believe that this is as true of the Christian cross as it the American flag and National Anthem. They are shared by all – each of us drawing from them levels of inspiration and meaning.

When a community is under stress, experiencing hardship, loss, disappointment, it is not surprising that anxiety levels go up. At some point that distrust and anger gets reflected inward. I’ve certainly seen and experienced churches go through this -- attendance and giving drops, clergy come and go, factions leave over the slightest controversy or slight.

Many believe that we in this country and the world are living through a time of great dislocation and uncertainty. People are genuinely fearful of the future. Workers fear being replaced by technology. We have fought two recent wars with all-volunteer troops where sacrifices have fallen disproportionately upon poorer communities and proud military families. Our nation’s nerves are raw. In these moments, it can become harder and harder to presume the best intentions of those with whom we do not see eye to eye.

If good advice was the only thing that Paul could offer to the Philippians, Romans, Corinthians and other, I don’t believe they could have sustained the communities they way his words did. He pointed them to Christ. He reminded them of why and in whom they believed.

Christ Jesus “was in the form of God and did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Another way to think about this: If you know you are God’s son on earth, you might be tempted to use this perk to your advantage. To live an easy comfortable life. To eat, drink and be merry. To conquer and rule. To accumulate, dominate and preside. To retire to the countryside and live out a peaceful retirement and die of an old age surrounded by those who loved you. To float over problems and discomforts without even touching the dirt and the grime of this world. We

know, this was not Jesus' chosen life. He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. People cursed him, drove him out of their towns, judged him as a heretic, and maligned him for the company he kept. Yet he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.

If despised or rejected in his life, God also lifted him to heaven and gave him the name that is above every name, "so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend."

Every knee should bend – interesting image. As a subject would bend a knee to her king or queen. As a sign of respect and honor. But this king would wear a crown of thorns not a crown encrusted with jewels and he would ache for the injustices of this world.

If, in a free society, we are not in full control of our symbols or gestures, we may never agree on the other's views or actions. And that can discourage and frustrate.

What I hope we can learn to control, or at least own, is how we behave and respond. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." That was the sameness of mind and being of full accord that Paul was getting at.

What would Jesus do? That pesky, repetitive and disruptive question comes around to us again and again.

I said last week how many of Jesus's parables show his concern for the least, the lowly, the last, the lost and the losers of society. He emptied himself to become like the least and the lowly.

Exodus 17:1-2 In the wilderness after the Exodus, there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." People are thirsty for water that truly quenches our thirst for a more joy-filled and God grounded life.

There were no watercoolers in Jesus' day. But there were wells. It was at well where Jesus met a woman with a checkered past. In the book that we have been reading midweek for our Living in Faith series, *The Very Good Gospel* by Lisa Harper writes that: "a well serves as a metaphor for a place of legacy and love. It is a place where deals are made and people are set apart for God's purposes. Jesus sat by Jacob's well, and the nameless Samaritan woman – representing a cross section of ethnicities and living on the margin of the margins – met him there."

So, the next time we are at those water coolers, barber shops, bus stops, and lunch breaks, as we engage and wade into the latest topic of public conversation and controversy, may our faith ground and inform us. With all the conversation about standing or kneeling: who stands at the center of our lives? Who are we willing to stop out and stand up for? And what injustices can we no longer remain silent about and accept as given. What heartache and longing will bring us to our knees?

Paul was right: God is at work in us.