

Sermon

October 1, 2017

Based on Philippians 2:1-13

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These have been tough times for the NFL. It started last year, when Colin Kaepernick started kneeling, and then sitting, during the playing of the national anthem. He did it is an act of protest, basically saying that in light of the ongoing experiences of police brutality against people of color and what appears to be little to no accountability of law enforcement, that there is a problem in America. Now, Kaepernick isn't playing in the NFL. Not a single team will sign him. But other players started following his example. Last Sunday it came to a head, when the tweets of President Trump prompted many players to want to support the rights of fellow players to protest as they see fit. Whole teams either did not take the field during the national anthem, or some teams took a knee as an entire squad.

Needless to say, the whole situation stirred up a great deal of divisiveness. I know people who are boycotting the NFL until Kaepernick gets signed. I know others who are boycotting the NFL because of the players who are protesting during the playing of the national anthem, which comes across as being disrespectful to the flag and those who fought for our country. People are burning team jerseys, dumping their season tickets, trying to get a refund for their Directv Sunday ticket football package. It's been ugly. And it has been yet another example of the divisiveness that seems to be thriving in our nation in so many different ways.

In a few weeks, the Committee on a Way Forward will be gathering again in order to start hammering out some possible pathways for how the United Methodist Church might stay united in the face of deep division around matters of the expression of human sexuality and other divisive matters. The committee is hopeful of finding some possibilities to present which will be considered at the first ever special session of General Conference in 2019. But while they do their work, some Methodists are laying the groundwork for the real possibility of

some kind of schism, the splintering of the UMC into two, three, or more separate churches. Yes, there are divisions within the UMC.

Today, however, is a special day. For many years the first Sunday in October has been called World Communion Sunday. This is the one Sunday in which churches are encouraged to celebrate communion because this sacrament in addition to baptism are the two sacraments that all churches do, no matter what kind of church they are. For two thousand years people have been baptized and have received communion. The idea that many different kinds of churches all receive communion on this day is meant to be a powerful symbol of what unites us as Christians, the body of Christ, one universal church. And yet, we have a broken communion! We United Methodists have an open table. All are welcome to come, whether or not you are a United Methodist. But that is not true for all churches. You and I are not allowed to receive communion at a Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox church and they are told not to receive here. We all will be having communion today but we can't have communion with each other. The divides remain.

How can we effectively respond to all that divides us, as churches, as American citizens? How can we resist the temptation to fall into our own tribes, turn our backs on those who are not one of us, and accept that what divides us is too wide and deep that it can never be bridged? I for one refuse to accept the notion that there are divisions that are impossible to be bridged. I believe, and I hope you do as well, that there is much more that unites us as Christians, as American citizens, as human beings, than what divides us. Every now and then we see or experience for ourselves the unity that is possible among those who look at each other as "those people," when "we" and "they" become "us." What can we do to make such experiences of unity more common, more the norm?

Seeking unity in the midst of division was something Paul held dearly. And that's something when you consider that Paul was a bit of a lightning rod. He said things back then that people still get mad about today. We are neither male nor female, but are all one in Christ Jesus but women aren't allowed to preach? Come on Paul! He sometimes had choice words for Peter, calling out Jesus' main man as a hypocrite. He

called a few other ne'er-do-well's "super apostles" with a smirk. Nevertheless, many of the letters he wrote that we have in our Bibles stressed the importance of coming together, being unified, forming communities of love. Being unified really mattered to Paul. And by unified he meant including everyone, not just people who agreed with him on all matters. And for a hard-headed guy like Paul that was an improvement from his younger, more zealous days, in which he arranged the persecution, jailing, and even killing of people who held different religious views. Yeah, Paul was a tough guy. But God worked on his heart in a big way. Paul knew a thing or two about grace and second chances.

In the scripture we heard this morning, Paul defines unity as having one mind, which is the mind of Christ. But what does having the same mind mean? It does not mean thinking the same thoughts. It does not mean agreeing on every detail. It does not mean finishing each other's sentences. No, to have the same mind is to have the same motives, the same commitments, the same values. So in shorthand, Paul is telling the Philippians and us that unity comes when we all hold the same commitments and values. And whose commitments and values are we to hold? Those of Jesus, who demonstrated in his life and teaching what those commitments and values are. And one way to summarize those commitments and values is found in John 3:16, 17: for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send his son to the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him. God is committed to saving the world. God values the world. And so we as Christians are to be unified in our commitment to value and save the world.

Now, this can be pretty heady stuff. Our job is to save the world! That's what superheroes do, right? That's pretty bold, to take on the world saving business. "What line of work are you in, Susan?" "I'm working to save the world." Whoa! So it should not be a surprise to us that for Paul to have the mind of Christ is to embrace humility. Now what does humility mean? It does not mean to think of yourself as worthless or of little value. Nothing could be further from the truth. You

and I are precious and wondrously made. God counts on us to be a part of God's world saving enterprise so that alone should extinguish ideas that you don't have any value. For those of you who were here last Sunday to hear Faith, you got a good message about your value. So humility has nothing to do with minimizing your value.

Nor does humility mean thinking to yourself, "There's nothing I can do." I hear people all the time say, "I can't do anything, I'm just a..." OK, maybe none of us can run a 400 yard dash in 5 seconds. OK, none of us can leap tall buildings with a single bound. But to take the position that humility means claiming you have no means to contribute or have no power, that's simply not true. We can do all things, but not on our own power. We can do all things, through Christ, who strengthens us.

So what is humility? Humility is acknowledging that every good thing you and I accomplish is made possible by God's partnering presence. To be humble is to say, "With God's help, I did that, I accomplished that goal, I did a good job, I rocked it." To be conceited is to think that you achieved something all by yourself. To be humble is to know that you had help along the way in the achievement, in particular, the help of God, who perhaps gave you the good idea, inspired you to go after it, and empowered you to press on, especially when it got tough or you were getting discouraged. Humility is acknowledging that you and I do life together, with each other and with God who is always within us, our ever present help in time of need.

Humility is also linked with emptying yourself, and to empty yourself is to suffer loss. Paul writes of how Jesus considered equality with God not something to cling to, but instead he chose to empty himself, taking on the form of a human servant, willing to suffer death for our salvation. Jesus chose to empty himself. And that emptying is paired with loss. When Jesus emptied himself, he lost something. What did he lose? I don't know for sure.

But I do know what it is to experience loss and to feel empty inside. It's an experience that is common to us all. I remember the emptiness I felt inside when my mom died unexpectedly. Life for everyone else kept going while I wanted the world to stop. My friends

kept going to class, hanging out, catching a movie. All I wanted to do was stay in my dorm room. I had no appetite and food tasted bland. I had lots of people who were there for me and I appreciated their presence and sympathy. But my mother was gone and I felt empty inside, hollowed out.

I wonder if Jesus ever felt empty inside? He experienced loss. He lost his father Joseph, likely at a young age. He lost his cousin, John the Baptist. He lost relationships with people who could not understand or were offended by his teaching and the things he did. For a minute he thought he was going to lose his disciples. In John 6, after a bunch of people decided to no longer follow Jesus, he looked at Peter and said, “Are you all going to leave me too?” Thankfully, Peter said, “to whom would we go? You have the words of life.” I imagine Jesus was gratified by that answer. But there were a lot fewer followers than Jesus had before and I bet he felt a little empty inside. But then, how empty he must have felt when Peter and the rest of them did abandon him, and he faced the beatings and the crucifixion alone? He even cried out to God, quoting Ps. 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Yeah, Jesus emptied himself. Jesus knew what it was like to be hollowed out inside, this man of sorrows.

Jan Richardson is an artist that I know. We went to seminary together. I want to share with you what she wrote a few years back.

The hollowing began the moment Gary died. In the weeks that followed, it came as a physical sensation: in the center of my chest, an emptying nearly tangible, a hollowing out of the heart and of the life I had known.

Last week I visited with a friend of mine whose husband died a year and a half before Gary. We spoke of the hollowing. We talked about how there is nothing that will ever fix the emptiness. And we spoke, too, of how the emptiness can become a space that, in one of the mysteries of grief, leaves us more and more open to the receiving of joy.

The hollowing happens. Life will empty us out, whether we will it or not. Yet Paul reminds us this week that we

belong to the Christ who freely chose to empty himself: who gave himself completely in a way that, paradoxically, did not diminish him but helped to reveal the fullness of who he was, and is. Encompassed by the Christ who enfolds our emptiness in his own, we become free to choose how we will respond to the emptying. In the emptying that naturally happens in life, as well as in the emptying Christ asks us to seek out and embrace, how will we allow the hollowing to open our hearts to the world we are called to serve in joy and in love?

I appreciate what she wrote about how we get to choose how we will respond to the emptying that we all experience. The emptying makes room in our hearts. There is an open space that loss brings. What will we fill that space with? We get to choose.

A lot of bad news has been coming out of Puerto Rico since Hurricane Maria wiped out the whole commonwealth. Loss on that island must be palpable. The people are surrounded by loss. I don't believe any of us here have experienced the loss that these Puerto Ricans are going through, but we do know of the emptiness that loss brings. How empty the people of Puerto Rico must feel.

But the emptiness inside is being filled. As people stand in line for hours to get gas, to get food, to get water, to get ice, the emptiness is being filled with sharing this common plight together. One small community is pooling their resources together. Some guys were gathering wood in order to start a fire upon which they were determined to cook meals for their neighbors. In another community, someone who was stocked with solar powered lamps distributed them to their neighbors. Communities who have no water coming out of their taps are going to a local spring to fill their water jugs and to share their stories, their struggles, and to figure out how to move forward. In the emptiness of this terrible disaster, community is being built. And this community that is being built in Puerto Rico will be their salvation.

And so, Paul tells us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. He isn't talking about how to be saved. We are saved by faith

in Jesus. Paul is talking about how to live out the salvation we have. He is challenging us to live a saved life, a life that is influenced by and empowered by God so that we will and do what delights God. And to the extent that each of us can do this, we experience the unity that Paul longed for, and I would say God longs for. It's a unity in which each of us care for each other, have compassion for each other, even enjoy each other. And not just us in this room, but also, especially, those who are not here right now. They are God's beloved as well. We empty ourselves to make room for them.

So if, by God's help, we can do this: be humble, fill our emptiness with compassion and joy, share God's commitment to save the world, then we will not only experience unity but be a sign that divisions can be overcome, that real community is not only possible, it's at the root of God's intention for the world. So on this Sunday, as we participate in holy communion, along with millions of other Christians around the world today, let us commit anew to the mind of Christ, so that our hearts might be filled with the love of God and with love for others.