

Loving the way God loves

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC, on October 29, 2017

http://lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp29_RCL.html

One of my favorite movies of all time, besides all of the Star Wars movies of course, is *Miracle*¹, the 2004 film about the 1980 US Olympic hockey team. At one of the first practices for this new team, two players get in a fight. I mean, it's hockey after all so who is surprised. This was a group of college players, many of whom had played against each other in the same conferences at rival schools for years. There may or may not have been some frustrations to get out. So coach Herb Brooks, played by Kurt Russell, has them introduce each other. They say their name and hometown and Coach Brooks says, "Who do you play for?" The first three guys say their schools: Minnesota, Boston University, Boston College. They do this several more times at various practices and team gatherings, and each time, they players say the name of their college team. Finally, in one of the tune-up games in September 1979, just before the Olympics were to begin in Lake Placid, NY, the US team goes over to Oslo and manages a tie against a Norway team that barely qualified for the Olympics that year. Several of the players are more interested in scoping out the young women in the stands than paying attention to the game that is happening. So Coach Brooks has them do sprints. On the ice. After a 60 minute game. He gives them a few little "pep talks," reminding them that the name on the front of their jersey matters a lot more than the name on the back, and then has them do more sprints. Every now and then, he'll ask one of them, "Who do you play for?" When he gave the name of his college, they'd do more sprints. Finally, one player, the one who would score the game-winning goal in the most famous hockey game ever played on American ice, stands tall, gasps for air, and says, "Mike Eruzione. Winthrop, Mass." Who do you play for, Coach Brooks asks? "I play for the United States." Every other player looks at him in disbelief. Brooks says, "That's enough for today," and walks off the ice. If you don't know how the story of the 1980 Olympic hockey team ends, then watch the movie.

It's an incredibly poignant image to go along with the Gospel readings we've been hearing the past several weeks. Jesus has been in quite a tussle with the Pharisees. We've been working our way through the end of Matthew's Gospel. We skipped Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Matthew 21, but all of the readings in October have been during what we know as Holy Week, the time between his arrival in Jerusalem and his crucifixion. The Pharisees and Sadducees, religious leaders of the

¹ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0349825/?ref_=nv_sr_2

time, have been poking at Jesus ever since, upon his arrival in Jerusalem, he drove out the money changers in the Temple. And Jesus, too, has been less-than-timid in his response. When they try to trap him, he tells a parable in which they are clearly the bad guys or at least the ones without their eyes open to God's hand at work. Last week and this week, they take a few more shots at Jesus, but Jesus responds differently. When asked in last week's Gospel about the legality of paying taxes to Caesar, Jesus says, "Sure, but give to God what is God's." Cortney challenged us last week to think about that statement in light of our own humanity and the humanity of those around us². That if we are to give to God what is God's, then we are giving ourselves, and we live as though the divine is in everyone and everything around us. Jesus is not trying to divide, but to unite. To say to the religious leaders of his day, "We're in this thing together, not just against the Roman occupiers, but this whole creation and Kingdom of God thing, we're all on the same team."

The story continues this week. Someone asks him which is the greatest commandment in the law, and Jesus goes back to the roots of his faith, to the book of Deuteronomy: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And shall love your neighbor as yourself." If you can't do BOTH of those things, you aren't going to be able to fulfill any of the other laws either. When this Pharisee asks Jesus what he thinks the greatest law is, I'm not sure what other answer he thought Jesus might give. He was a solid Jew who knew the law inside and out (for reasons that we know but his contemporaries didn't). Citing this as the greatest commandment, on which hang all the other laws, was the most Jewish thing Jesus could have done in front of a group of devout Jewish religious leaders. It doesn't matter how many questions you ask me, how many ways you try and trap me, at the end of the day, Jesus says, we are all on the same team. Created in the same image of the same God. What matters most is that we love each other and we love God, not just whole-heartedly, but whole-livedly. We are called to live out that love with every ounce of our being, because that's the same way that God loves us.

This summer, your vestry adopted a Vision statement, crafted by a small group of others with many skills in that area, that says we are going to be a church that loves the way God loves. What does it look like to love God whole-livedly and to love as God loves?

It means remember that we are all on the same team → that we rise and fall together → not as a nation or a religion, but as children of God, created in the image of God.

It means that we put our faith and trust in things we can't always see, but we believe are there.

² http://christchurchnewbern.com/worship/sermons/?sermon_id=166

It means we rise above the chaos of our culture that says love of fame and power and money is more important than love of God or neighbor.

It means we reach into our hearts just a little deeper to see people, our brothers and sisters, the way Jesus sees them → with compassion.

It means that we look at our calendars and our skills and our budget to see where and how we can contribute to the mission of God.

The last portion of today's Gospel has confounded generations of people, and while I don't pretend to fully understand it either, it does help (I think) to see it with this perspective:

Jesus cites Psalm 110:1 in which God is promising to his Anointed One (Messiah) victory over his enemies. David's verse marks the Messiah as his superior, not merely his descendent. The Pharisees have been looking at this passage one way and one way only. But Jesus pushes them to (hopefully) realize that the Messiah does not look like what they expect. Indeed, the role of the Messiah is bigger than that. The Messiah, or Jesus, was sent to win over humanity by love and not by force.

If we, as followers of that Messiah, can be united as one team, one effort to show a glimpse of that love towards to those the world pushes to the side, then we will have not only loved God & neighbor whole-lifedly, but we will indeed have changed the world.

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