

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Holy God, on this day of resurrection, we come together as your blessed seekers. We come to recognize our beloved nature as children of God, crafted and called for your purposes. We recognize that in these walls, we have a higher calling than to be Jeff or Vicky or Wayne or Mary. We become sister and brother, united by more than blood but the Holy Spirit. In that Spirit, Holy God, help us to see our neighbor truly seeking to be more than a member to be gained or another worker for the projects. Help us to welcome our neighbor as one who can bolster our fellowship in faithfully following the calling of Jesus Christ. Allow us to welcome the stranger as we would welcome the Christ himself.

Holy God, on this day of competition, we hear your calling to be united as one blessed people. No matter the lines that divide us, we hear your calling of blessedness through our very natures. Help us to remember that the focus is Christ, not the minutia of dogma that so easily separates. As long as we follow the Christ, as long as we remember who we are in Christ's eyes, we are found faithful. We pray all these things in the name of the one who directs the greater Body of Christ to be love in this world, the Lord Jesus, who taught us to pray not individually but as one...

SERMON

Let's talk about Cam Newton. Of course, you should all know the key to the Carolina Panther offense; he is the Quarterback that makes it all go. I'm sure you want to talk about game plan, how to shut him down, how to make him ineffective. After all, how many of you just can't stand him anymore? Wow, and we haven't even played the game yet. How many of you respect him as a person? Wait, how many really know him as a person? It's hard these days. Most players you only know on the field; we never get to know them too much

off the field unless they really do something horrible, which gets published everywhere. Even more rarely, the good stories about players get published, where we can find out how they are positively affecting the community. But today, I want to say some good things about Cam Newton. Cam Newton is a brother in Jesus Christ. He is a devoted father. He leads a foundation whose slogan is "Every 1 Matters," which attends to the educational, athletic program, and charitable needs in the cities of Charlotte and Atlanta, two communities Cam has connections with and truly loves. He's a likeable guy who is good at and has a lot of fun in what he does for a living. I like Cam Newton, and if he wins the Super Bowl this evening, I will applaud him and his teammates for their incredible effort in completing a 15-1 season and winning the Super Bowl, the highest achievement in all of football.

Now, as you are sitting there, check yourselves. How are you feeling? Is your skin crawling? Are you sick to your stomach? Are you tired hearing about football from the news AND the preacher? Either way, it's important on this day to see where we are. We come to one of the most divided times in all America outside of Election Day: Super Bowl Sunday. On this Sunday, I unabashedly and unapologetically have a very football oriented message, but it's an important message to hear. The bottom line is that, as we enter these doors, everything football and football fandom teaches us is wrong. Yes, wrong. In our deeply engrained competitive culture, it seeps into our faith in ways that we realize and do not realize. What I submit is not only is this inappropriate, it's downright unfaithful to the Gospel and to the Spirit of Jesus Christ. We live by a different message, one that says when one of us is defeated, all of us are defeated. It doesn't work the same way.

But we want it always to work the same way, the ways of the world and the ways of the church. There's a saying that Jesus Christ came to preach the Kingdom of God but instead he wound up with the church. This is not meant to be flattering. It's like, I meant to go eat some great pizza and instead I got heartburn. And I can understand why this isn't so flattering. It feels like we are in one of the most divided times in all of Christianity. United Methodist General Conference 2016, if you ask my colleagues, sounds like a time of distress and torture when we should be coming together. And, let's be honest, a lot of the focus is human sexuality. Frankly, I'm tired of it all. I'm along the lines of "agree to disagree," but instead, we want our distinctions to rule the day on who is "right" and who is "wrong," who is our "friend" and who is our "enemy."

After all, distinctions are the name of the game when we talk about football. I'm a Bears fan first, then Broncos, so you know I'm emotionally invested in this game. And I know you are Broncos fans too. Notice, though, that when it comes to football, that doesn't really matter. I could tell you that Peyton Manning is the best Quarterback the Broncos have ever had. Would you agree? I'm sure some people would stand up and say, "No! It's John Elway!" and list off about twenty reasons why. Some might even stand up and say "Craig Morton!" for the way in which he led the Broncos to their first Super Bowl appearance. But no one should ever stand up and say "Tim Tebow!" That's just so clearly misguided. But seriously, if I say Peyton Manning and you say John Elway, is anyone really going to get up and tell me, "YOU ARE NO TRUE BRONCOS FAN!"? And yet, it happens all the time in the church. The minutia becomes the big picture, and everything else goes out the window. Heck, the first big separation in the church was in 1054, creating the Eastern Orthodox and the Catholic Church. It had to do with whether the Holy Spirit comes from

the Father and the Son or just the Father. Who cares? But that's not the whole story. It was a power struggle between the Archbishops of Rome and Constantinople; they wanted to decide who was more important. The real reason between the schism of 1054 was that there was no love between brothers and sisters in the East and West. Little has changed with the church, but that doesn't mean we are called to more.

That calling is this passage of 1 Corinthians 12. This is my favorite passage of scripture because this is what the church should be. There are many gifts, but by the power of the Spirit, they become oriented to the same goal. This is the Kingdom in action. There are no questions about what you believe beyond whether Christ is Lord, whether you adhere to a certain doctrine, whether you think something is right or not. The point is whether you are "in" or not for the Kingdom of God; if so, let's get to work. The other distinctions flow away. "In the one Spirit we were baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and made to drink of one Spirit." That's pretty big, considering all those distinctions at that age. Jews and Greeks are total opposites in their eyes. Jews knew of the Covenants of God; the Greeks did not. Free peoples and slaves were on top and on the rock bottom of society at the time, respectively. Even so, the distinctions mean nothing with the baptism in one Spirit. In other words, "In one Spirit we were baptized into one body – young or aged, Catholic or Protestant, Republican or Democrat, black or white, conservative or liberal, Panther fan or Bronco fan – and made to drink of one Spirit." I'm sure I said some things in there you might disagree with, and I know I did, but according to scripture, we all have our place; we are all important in the bigger scheme of things.

When I think about 1 Corinthians 12, I think about the kicker. Yes, the Kicker. There is no one more beloved, ignored, or hated on the football field, depending on the

situation. If you miss a chip-shot field goal, there is no bigger goat. If he hits a game-winning field goal, then he is celebrated as one of the team. Otherwise, he's, well...kind of ignored. In fact, many think that the kicker really isn't a football player. He's not in the trenches. He doesn't work on tackling. He's not focused on strength and conditioning. Instead, he spends all day kicking the ball for whatever situations may come up. Long field goals, short field goals, onside kicks. "On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable," as the scripture says. Without the kicker, victory often isn't possible. The important field goal, the necessary deep punt, all of these contribute to the whole in a way that we miss until they do something rather amazing or rather foolish. That ought not be so, because we all have a part to play in the whole, and no one, no one can overrule scripture's indication that we each have an important role.

It solidifies then in how we all come together. In college, my professors knew that I was quite the sports fan. One of my religion professors, knowing all about my sports fandom, challenged me to answer the question: What is Victory in Jesus? It seems obvious, but sports and following Christ aren't the same thing. As a sports fan, you learn one thing. You beat down your opponent until they recognize your superiority. You want to wipe the field with them and have them walked away totally depressed and defeated. You want to be the one and only who is standing at the end of the day lifting the trophy while the other team walks off in pain. That is victory in sports. That's easy victory, making it all about me and what I want. Victory in Jesus is much harder, because it means that we put our personal agendas in a secondary place, and look to the whole.

Victory in Jesus, judging by this passage, means something entirely different. Who did Christ come for in this world? If there is any "but" or "except," then the answer is

incorrect. There is no them vs. us but a combined “we,” for Christ came to redeem all of creation. If someone walks off this field in defeat, then all of us have failed. The Body of Christ is what this looks like. If one part fails, the whole fails. When one part succeeds, the whole succeeds. This, more than any other team, is where we need each other.

And how do we grow and strengthen this Body? It starts with the simple fact of knowing one another, for knowing breeds caring. If you see Cam Newton as just another football player who happened to have a good year, it’s easy to despise him and all he stands for. If you see other people wearing Carolina Panthers gear, it’s easy to consider them foolish and misguided. On the other hand, if you look at them as well-rounded human beings, the tone shifts. Cam Newton has the same struggles in his community that we face and tries to address them. As a brother in Christ, he is just trying to do the best he can and become the best person and player he can be. He’s not perfect...but neither are we.

Think about this at around 7 or 8 this evening. When the game is over and the confetti flies, it will be either blue and silver or blue and orange. Some of us will be very pleased, and some of us will be very depressed. Either way, no matter who is on the podium, we gotta stand back and say, “Wow, look at what they’ve done to win it all.” It will be well deserved, whichever way the ball bounces. At the end of the day, we acknowledge our brothers’ and sisters’ good work, even if we aren’t on the same side on the football team or a theological debate because, after all, they are our brothers and sisters.

It’s time to define wins and losses differently. If there is a “them” and an “us” in these walls, then there is no victory possible. That’s for the football field, and it has its definite limits. Perhaps, this is where we can start with that challenging piece of scripture “love your enemy.” Now, I mean start...when Jesus said that, he wasn’t talking about the

Green Bay Packers. It's a place to start seeing our so-called "opponents" as human beings often with the same faith and the same struggles that we face.

As one of my mentors always said, "It's just that easy; it's just that hard." If you're finding this all absolutely agreeable and simple to live, then perhaps we need to dig deeper. If you're finding this difficult, then we're on the right track. We are human, which means we fall short. We are human, which means we can and should always grow. The Word of God and God's eternal callings should be inconvenient to us, at the very least. You can still enjoy football, you can still root for your team and root against the other team, but there's a time to leave it on the field and love even that enemy. We all too often judge by the ways of football in God's house when God is calling us to victory in Jesus. He was defeated by the world's ways to show us what winning looks like. He lost his life to show us gain. He was scorned by those he loved; indeed, he loved all who showed him nothing but grief. For the sake of the Body, are we willing to do the same? Are you willing to lose that we may win? Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.