

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, the opportunities before us are incredible. Today, we are offered life; we are offered new chances to be the Body of Christ. Help us to grasp these opportunities, to make them our own in the midst of sinfulness, in the midst of our failures. Help us to hear the cries of your creation throughout our neighborhoods, our cities, our states, our country, our world. Help us to hear the cries of pain and struggle within ourselves. You are the God of newness; help us to see the newness among us this morning and the opportunity to be that grace that you grace us with. We pray for those things we have lifted aloud and those in our hearts; hear our prayers, Lord, as you always have.

Holy God, we know of so much that divides us. Despite all those things that we can agree upon, we tend to look at the 10 percent that makes us different. We shame our neighbors whose main difference is a difference of opinion. Help us acknowledge, God, that we are more than that 10 percent. When you call us to be of one mind, it does not mean we have to think the same thing, but that you created us differently to assist one another with those gifts. We pray all these things in the name of the one who loves us for what makes us one, not what separates us, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

OK, so, today's the big day. I just have a couple of questions, and I want to see a show of hands. Please, be honest. Who here is rooting for the Denver Broncos in the Super Bowl? OK, look around and see whose hands are raised. Who here is rooting for the Seattle Seahawks? Look around again. Who here has no preference or just doesn't care about football? And see who those people are. Denver Broncos fans, your task is to bring all those people not on your side to your way of thinking. Everyone who does not have the

same opinion, well, you just get out of here. This building is about thinking the same way about everything. If you aren't with us, you're against us. I think that's biblical.

No, seriously, don't do that. Should we really determine another's worth by the team he/she is cheering for? No, that just comes down to a preference that ends with the game. It means nothing in the grand scheme of things. If that's the case for sports, that barely touches the issues of the Christian world or our greater world. Many Christians draw up boundary lines based on the smallest of principles. Scripturally, we are called to unity, but not to be the same. Today we answer the question, "What side are you on?" The answer is none at all. There are no sides when we take up the name of Christian; there is just us, united under the Gospel of Christ. Let's take time to recognize what really matters as we look at what divides us and the remedies for our division from these scriptures.

Unity is a difficult word for us when we aren't all the same. We find ourselves in a very divided time. If nothing else, look at Congress. I just watched the State of the Union this last Tuesday, and I was greatly saddened. The formalities showed unity, but that was only on the surface. While this should be an event of bringing together, it showed how far away we really are as a country. People look around Congress to see whether the other is red or blue, for one means friend and the other, foe. No matter which side of the aisle you agree with, let's be honest, both sides act childishly. There is no sense of mature coming together and faithful compromise; there is only war and impasse. Today, we recognize sports. Of course, we will be divided to an extent when our teams are playing. I'm will always give Jeff a ribbing about the Packers, 'cause I don't like them. Some leave division in the stadium, and others bring it into the world. In 2011, at the opening game of the San Francisco Giants and LA Dodgers baseball seasons, a father travelling to LA to see the

Giants was beaten by unruly Dodgers fans who actually won that game, 2-1. This last June, two years after his brutal attack, he has come home. This disgusts me, but I know it's more than the sport. In the church, we have a lot of problems. We can act like Congress, limiting the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a few hot-button issues. It becomes, what do you think about this issue? Or that issue? These are not the beginnings of dialogue, but the beginnings of battle lines. Name the big issues in the church today, and each side is naming who is superior and who is inferior, not educated. We are not carrying Christ's light. The church has become a divided place, and when we cannot even name our own dividedness, how can we minister to the world? We need something beyond affiliations to guide us.

When I was a young child, I remember my mother reading to me every night. One of the books she read to me was "The Sneeches" by Dr. Seuss. It tells the story of these tall yellow creatures named Sneeches; some had a green star on their bellies and others did not. The ones with the green stars looked down on those who had no star, thinking they were not special. Then came along the inventor Sylvester McMonkey McBean, with a machine that would give those Sneeches a green star on their bellies, only for three-dollars. Soon, all Sneeches had a star on their chests. Well, those Sneeches already with a star learned that Sylvester McMonkey McBean had a machine to take the star off their chests for the special price of ten dollars. Well, this escalates until Sneeches of all kinds forget what it was about to begin and Sylvester McMonkey McBean runs away a very rich man. This story stuck with me; it showed how we take the smallest thing and make it the biggest thing when there's so much else that matters. Dr. Seuss' story sounds like Ephesians' Message.

The passage from Ephesians tells a great deal about the struggles of this church. The unspoken question to this passage is, "Why bother with unity?" There was a lot that

was wrong. There were Gentiles, there were Jews, and the thought was that these people were so diametrically opposed that one had to be right, and the other had to be inferior. One had green stars on their bellies, and the other ones did not. No one gets a pass. The response is frank and to the point: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." God is one; God calls us to be one people.

All of these examples are emphasizing oneness. Unfortunately, "oneness" often means "sameness," like the Sneeches. There needs to be a difference between "oneness" and "sameness." We can be one without being same. In sports, I'm quite proud of my Nebraska Cornhuskers. I listened to a radio show in Denver about a week ago talking about rivalries, and they brought up the old rivalry between the Huskers and the CU Buffaloes. They commented how absolutely hard it was to get fired up and angry at their opponent when the Husker fans were just too darn nice to them. It was hilarious. That's how we roll, always. In 2011, Catherine and I went to the Bears/Broncos game in Denver. The Bears had lost Cutler and were playing Caleb Hanie as their quarterback, and Denver was in the midst of Tebow Mania. I don't miss those days...for either team. We went as Bears fans. What happened was that the Bears had the game, but the Broncos came back to win it at the end. Many Broncos fans were taunting us and other Bears fans. I was highly disappointed, bordering on angry for this unacceptable performance. However, I was not going to be a victim. I was not going to let this take me down. I made a point of going up to Denver fans, saying "Great game." Most everyone responded in kind. I saw some rude Bears fans arguing with a Broncos fan. I went up to her, saying I was sorry for these bad fans and that it was a great game. Not only did I want Bears fans to be redeemed, I disliked

that lousy sportsmanship. She responded kindly and commented how well the Bears played. I'm not trying to blow my own horn but to show that we have a choice to buy into the division or we can be the better person, treating others as humans, not opponents.

In our church, we struggle with oneness in many ways. He is a divisive figure, but I like the example of Pope Francis. The Catholic Church has been fraught with issues in recent years, causing a lot of woundedness among its people and people around the world. Nevertheless, I think that he has shown us the Gospel of Christ in a very special way. He is a part of a church that has strong stances toward many hot-button issues, and he has not wavered from those stances. However, the way he has treated those who would be considered his opponents is revolutionary. He does not damn them; he loves them, despite differences in opinion. Some dislike him; some want him to take down their so-called opponents, but he doesn't. He lives in the Gospel with love and compassion, humanizing those others call inhuman. In other words, Pope Francis loves his so-called "enemies."

In Nebraska, I learned something funny I carry with me to this day. I learned you can say anything you want about someone, as long as you end it with "bless their heart." Catherine told me about a Pennsylvania variant of "God love 'er". Like, "Jeff and his Green Bay Packers can be a real pain in my rear end, bless his heart." We want to pass this off as naming what we really don't like with others and covering it with some form of care that isn't really care at all. But as Catherine said, the implied end to "God love 'er" is "because no one else does." It's nowhere near as real as this message from Jesus. Our second scripture might just be the hardest message of Jesus' ministry because it means we do things we don't nearly want to do. Jesus speaks clearly about those we do not care for, those we consider our opposition, and it is a message we do not want to hear. "I say to you, Love

your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” We have a complicated world, but we do not struggle with the kind of persecution that Jesus and his followers experienced in that day. We do have those who seriously hurt us, and we must beware of them, but our enemies cannot be those with a difference of opinion. It’s as if the smallest principle will tear everything apart. It can become a self-fulfilling prophecy where we create enemies that way. But truly and realistically, in the grand scheme of things, I think we can only begin to understand what it means to truly love your enemies. It doesn’t mean you just be nice to them and then talk about them behind their backs. It means you literally give of yourself to others as it is safe to do. As Martin Luther King said, “Hate does not drive out hate; only love can do that.” But it is always the harder route. It’s the walk that drives us to the humility that we do not want to live and doing things that we’d rather not do, but we do it for Christ and others. We can only begin to understand it when we look at the question from verse 47, “If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?” What more are we doing than others? How are we revealing the perfect love of God without discrimination? It’s a hard question, but that’s where faithfulness begins.

Whether you are rooting for the Seahawks or the Broncos, whether you have a green star or no star, whether you believe one part of doctrine or not, we have a choice. What side are you on? When it comes to living out the Gospel, the important question is not what we believe or what we think, but are we going to take up the cross daily and live a life that seeks faithfulness to loving our neighbor? It’s easy to be a warrior for whatever issue seems important, whether that be a sports team, a political party, or a hot-button issue, but it is harder, much, much harder, to be an advocate of love and unity in this world so easily divided. The calling of the Gospel is clear; how will we respond? Amen and amen.