

Team Jesus

This morning's text takes us to Corinth and Paul's letter to the church there. Paul is deeply devoted to this church and her people, having spent about 18 months preaching, teaching, praying, and debating there. He writes now, presumably from Ephesus having heard reports about the church from some visitors. Things are not as they should be, and Paul writes with an urgency born of his love for the church and the gospel message they share. [1 Corinthians 1:10-18, CEB]

It is odd not to have teams to root for these days. We should be in the early days of professional baseball, enjoying the late days of college baseball and softball, still talking about who won the Masters, and speculating on whether LeBron will be able to lead the Lakers to a championship after a long drought. I read somewhere that some Americans are getting up early to watch South Korean baseball as that league is finding a way to play actual games, safely distanced of course with the curve there sufficiently flattened for now. ESPN's documentary *The Last Dance*, about the drama of Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls' 6th championship was released early to fill the void and has enjoyed record-breaking ratings. And Andrew Cotter, a Scottish sportscaster for the BBC has garnered a huge following on Twitter for people who want to hear and watch as he gives play-by-play of his two labs, Olive and Mabel and their antics.¹ He details the end of a long walk and pits one dog against another in the gentlest and silliest ways. Will Mabel be able to pull off a last minute grab of a beloved toy? Will Olive be the one to win the battle of who can most disgrace herself on a morning walk? While I find that I am inclined to put myself on Team Mabel one day and Team Olive the next, most days I am simply thrilled to be on Team Silly Dog, laughing out loud at the everyday adventures of two sweet labs as recounted by a world class soccer analyst.

Choosing up teams has been a thing for humans over the centuries. It can be fun, but, as you are well aware, it can also be deadly and destructive. I am not sure how deadly the divisions in the Corinthian church are, but Paul clearly understands them to be destructive, not simply to those on either side but to the message

¹ <https://twitter.com/MrAndrewCotter>

and witness of the fledgling church. Apparently the Corinthians have divided themselves up according to who baptized them, so there is a Team Apollos, a Team Paul, and a Team Cephas, or Peter. Paul is not flattered by his team's loyalty; he is dismayed and outraged. This is not the news he longs to hear from his beloved community: "Has Christ been divided?" he asks. He worries that the divisions will undermine the message, THE message of who Christ is and what Christ has done. Bickering and belittling does nothing for the larger good. Bickering and belittling does nothing to point others to the saving work of Christ's crucifixion. To demean and declare superiority and disgust only draws everyone down to the mud and the muck, the messiness of human relationships and the challenges of living in a diverse community.

And historians tell us that ancient Corinth is a diverse community, as is the church Paul starts there. Freed slaves worship alongside wealthy merchants; Jews worship alongside Greeks. No longer dividing up into fan clubs for their favorite preachers does not mean that everyone sees eye-to-eye or always gets along. This is not Shangri-La or a make-believe magic kingdom. Next week we will hear Paul's famous lecture on love in the 13th chapter of this letter and be reminded of how the community is called to be *with* one another. This morning's text is an internal memo to the church about external and eternal things. The squabbles are clouding the church's primary message about the saving work of Christ. It is not an easy message to proclaim or share, for it demands that those who believe it set aside the dominant world's understanding of power and greatness. For you see this message, this word demands that we follow and emulate not a conquering hero, but a suffering servant. It is not about being on the winning side really. By all rational measures, those who follow Jesus are on the losing side. Jesus gives up everything, loses it all including his very life in order to show us the lengths to which God is willing to go to save people who are being destroyed by oppression, greed, violence, poverty, hopelessness, selfishness, and death itself. In Jesus Christ, God gives up his dearest gift, allowing his beloved Son to die a criminal's death on a shameful cross in order to redeem the world and save us all. That is not the news people think they want to hear. We think we want magic cures and grand shows of strength. We want to win, and yet it is in losing, in being claimed by the one who loses everything that we are saved and given life and wholeness and love beyond measure that nothing in life or death can diminish. We do nothing to win this love. We do nothing to earn this life. It is not about choosing sides; it is about being chosen, belonging body,

heart, soul, mind, and might to the only one who can truly save us. It is not about choosing to be on Team Apollos or Team Paul. It is about being chosen, selected, named, and claimed as a Child of God and living like it out in the world.

Tanisha Brunson-Malone is a forensic technician at the Hackensack University Medical Center. Overwhelmed by the sadness of her work in the wake of the pandemic, she realized earlier this spring that she needed to do something to bring some beauty to a place that bears a loud message of sadness and death. She now places a daffodil or another bright yellow flower on each body in her care. She does not know their stories or their names. She does not know who they loved or what language they spoke. She does not know who they voted for in the last election, or if they rooted for the Yankees or the Mets or anyone at all, but she is determined to bring beauty and dignity to each and every one of those in her care who have died without loved ones by their side. When a local funeral home director arrived one day, he had to blink to see if he could trust his eyes: a bright yellow flower rested on every white-draped figure. He saw a field of flowers where hours before there had only been a raft of pain and loss.² I do not know if Ms. Brunson-Malone is a Christian; I cannot be sure that she is a person of faith at all, but in her I see someone who in her own small way is determined not to be mired in the pettiness of division but to point to life and beauty in the face of too much death. I want to be like her. I want to be one who lovingly brings daffodils in the face of death. I want to be on a team like that.

There is so much that incites division these days. Anxiety about the health and welfare of entire populations is pitted against the need for people to find a way to survive and make a living and put a roof over their heads. Parents are overwhelmed by unending expectations and demands. Families are grieving deaths from afar. Essential workers cannot work from home. People of all ages are missing milestones such as graduations, weddings, and proms. People of color are afraid to go for a run. And people of all races, ages, genders, classes, and nations are dying from a virus that we still do not fully understand. We are all hurting, and in our pain and fear and anger, we are tempted to pick sides and point fingers, but as God's beloved children and Christ's adored siblings we are called to speak a different word, to bear a different witness. It's not that Christ is neutral.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/05/nyregion/coronavirus-flowers-bodies.html>

He picks sides. Christ is always on the side of saving and loving; Christ is always on the side of what is good and what is just. Following in his footsteps, Christ calls us—his body, the church—to offer compassion in the face of hatred, beauty in the face of ugliness, justice in the face of cruelty, and love in the face of despair. In Christ, the crucified and risen one we do not join a team to win a game; in Christ the crucified and risen one, we are chosen for a mission, to be part of his work of saving not simply our own skins but of redeeming the world. If we find ourselves wearing a jersey in any ultimate way, it is a baptismal gown, reminding us of grace abounding and unearned; if we are on a side it is the side of love, beauty, grace, joy, gentleness, forgiveness, service, redemption, humility, mercy, and justice; if we are on a team, it is Team Jesus where there is always room for one more.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.