

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

Images of Jesus: Unifier

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Isaiah 2:1-4; Galatians 3:23-29

A couple of weeks ago my wife Cindy and I learned that our daughter has joined a roller derby team. I don't know how many of you are familiar with roller derby, but my only recollection of it was from my childhood, when I would watch it in black and white and women would knock each other down and off a banked track at great speeds. I had no idea what the rules were. I only knew it was just fast and violent and perhaps better for our daughter than rugby, which she played in college. When we spoke with Katie, she tried to explain to us the basic rules and what her position would be...which is a jammer and not a blocker. And it is the jammer who tries to circle the track faster than anyone else. Needless to say, I did not understand all the concepts, rules or techniques. But I did understand the bottom line...one team tries to outscore the other. And in many ways, this is how roller derby is like any other sport. The team or individual with the most points wins. So, while I may not be able to appreciate all of the subtleties of the sport, I at least know the bottom line. Score more, win more. And my guess is that this is very much like many things in life. We are not as concerned about all of the details as we are about the bottom line.

I had been pondering that idea of knowing the bottom line this week as I thought about the texts before us, and what kept coming back to me was a question, do we know the bottom of line of this Jesus thing we do? Do we know the bottom line of why Jesus came and what he desired to accomplish? I ask that because we come here on Sunday mornings, during the week, give our money, and it might be good to know the bottom line. Over the years, I have discovered that the answer to what is the bottom line? It is usually two-fold. The first is that this Jesus thing is about eternal life and getting into heaven. This has been the answer for the church for probably about the last 1,800 years. Evangelists, pastors and street preachers all proclaim that heaven is only for those who believe in Jesus. The second answer is that it helps us to be good people. That following Jesus' example of his life of love, forgiveness and compassion offers us a moral compass for our lives. This answer has also been at the heart of Christian faith. But what if there is a third answer? What if there is a third answer that might actually be more central to this Jesus thing than the other two? Now I am not discounting either of the first two, but what I want to propose for this morning, is that there is a third, biblically based answer which is just as important, if not more important than the other two; and that answer is to create one, new united humanity.

To understand this, we need to return to our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah. Now Isaiah was originally a priest in the great high Temple in Jerusalem. One day about 740 years before the birth of Jesus he had an ecstatic encounter with the God of Israel inside the temple. God instructed him to remind the people of Judah of their obligations to God and to one another. This he did, even though it was not always pleasant. But along the way God also gave him visions of an amazing future...one that was almost unimaginable. And one of those visions was our passage from this morning. In that vision, Isaiah was shown a day when all the nations of the earth would flock to the mountain of God in order to learn to live in the ways of God. The shorthand for what the ways of God were would be to love God and love neighbor. And when the nations learned this way of living, then they would become one new people. We know this

because they would beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks and war would be abolished. Though they would all remain different nations, they would, in the end be one new humanity, sharing a way of life and hope.

The question for the people of God, as the years went by, was how would this come about? How would God bring all of these nations to learn about God's way of loving God and loving neighbor. The answer for the Apostle Paul, was that God would accomplish this, and had done this in and through the work of Jesus on the cross. In and through Jesus death and resurrection, God and made it possible for all nations to become one new people. In order to make this image come alive for us, I want to bring us back to this moment. So, let me ask, how many of you have ever rooted for a particular sports team at any level? High school, college, pro? How many of you have ever owned a jersey, cap, shirt or pin from one of those teams? Now one more, how many of you have ever seen people wearing the afore mentioned garb? Good, because what that garb shows is that people are divided over whom to root for. They root for their team and against the other team. We could see this vividly yesterday at the Michigan, MSU game. Now picture an entire society that is divided in that way. A society divided by their clothing. This was the Roman Empire. In the Empire different classes dressed differently, not simply by wealth or custom, but by law. So when you walked down the street, you could tell who was upper class and who was a slave and everyone in between. They were a divided people with some being considered more valuable than others.

It was into that divided world that Paul then said that when someone is baptized in Christ they put on Christ. In other words, regardless of what clothes one wore in the outside world, in the new world of Jesus, all those who were baptized put on the same clothes. This is why Paul could say that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. He could say it not because they had changed religion, or gender or status, but because they wore the same clothing. They were clothed in Christ. One way to think about this would be to imagine all of the baptized wearing a single white jersey with the words, "Beloved Child of God" written on it. They were a new people because they were a new team; a unified team; a team that had learned the ways of God together in Jesus Christ.

Why does this matter? What does it matter that in our baptisms we become one new people? That we become part of this new humanity? For me, it matters because of what is going to take place over the next twelve months. Over the next twelve months our nation will be put through incredible stress, first because of the impeachment inquiry and possible trial, and then through the election. Under normal circumstances this would not matter. But we have become a polarized society, torn apart over our president. And we are not only a polarized society, but Christianity in this nation is also polarized. Some Christians claim that our president is God's anointed. Others claim he is the anti-Christ. And so what is going to happen as we move forward is that Christians will begin to look at each other as the enemy. We will define Christian as someone who believes like us. And this will have the potential to tear apart friendships, churches and our nation. We will all be tempted to do this. And so this is what I want you to do when you feel that urge coming on. I want you to picture those people with whom you disagree wearing their generic, white jerseys with "Beloved Child of God" written on them. I want you to remember that all of the baptized have been clothed in Christ and that there is neither Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal, because we are all one in Christ.