“Where’s Our Rock?”

Matthew 21:23-32

10/01/17

When I was maybe 8 or 9 years old, I was at some kind of church gathering. There were a bunch of us youth standing outside messing around. I don’t know how we came upon this, but some of us started singing the national anthem. But in a fairly goofy and mocking way. After awhile someone grabs the back of my shirt and one of the other youth and pulls us aside. And we get read the riot act. It turned out to be Ellis, a gentleman who had fought in Vietnam. He laid into us. Saying how disrespectful it was to mock the national anthem. He explained how important it was to him, especially because of his military service. I can still remember how scared and shocked I was by all of this. This being my first remembrance of how important the flag and the anthem are to people.

So what does that story have to do with our scriptures for today, we will get there. Jesus had just arrived to Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. The whole city was in turmoil asking, who is this? Then he goes into the temple and drives out the money changers. He healed some blind and lame people in the temple. Then he went to Bethany and went to bed. What a crazy first day in Jerusalem! Then he wakes up in the morning and was very hungry. Maybe he is what we would call today, Hangry. In his hanger, he found a fig tree. He expected it to have some figs on it to cure his hunger. Well there was not. So he curses the poor fig tree. May no fruit ever come from you again! Then the fig tree withered at once. It didn’t say if the tree had been harvested already or if it was out of season for figs. The tree was in the wrong place at the wrong time. After cursing the fig tree, he turns it into a parable. If you have faith and do not doubt, you can do what I just did. Maybe I will have to try that to some of the apple trees in the alley behind the manse.

Jesus, probably still angry goes back to the temple and teaches. O no, the priests and elders thought, he is back again. Who is this guy they think? Who is this guy who rode in on a donkey, turned over the tables and cursed a helpless fig tree? By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority? In other words, let me see your credentials. Where did you study? Did God give you the ability to do these crazy things? In typical Jesus fashion, he answers the question with a question. “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?” Brilliant way to avoid the trap that the priests were laying. The question of authority is placed back on to the priests. Then the priests resort to politicking. So they huddle to come up with the perfect PR response. We can’t say that the authority came from heaven because we don’t believe it. And Jesus will just say then why don’t we believe. We also can’t say from human origin, because the crowd around us regards John as a prophet. They may not be all that concerned with Jesus’ true identity. They want to keep their power and privilege intact. We don’t know, they answer. Jesus replies, then I am not going to answer you either. It should have been done right there.

Jesus continues to lay it on. Another vineyard parable. A man had two sons. He told the first to go work in the vineyard. He said, no, but then changed his mind and went to work. He told the second go to work, he said ok. But he never showed. So which one did the will of his father. The priests answered, the first. Truly I tell you Jesus replied, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and prostitutes did. Even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him. It seems to imply, this question. What will it take for you to believe?

What will it take for you to believe? This makes me think of last Sunday. Not our worship service, but afterwards. For many folks out there, the true worship service takes place about 1pm, 4pm and 8 pm. I am of course talking about our National Football League games. They say ratings were down, but many including myself were looking to see what happened during the national anthem at each game. It seemed like they should have had a separate channel to broadcast each game’s national anthem. Which to me seems odd, since I participate in at least two national anthems per week during football and wrestling seasons. I stand and look at the flag with my hand over my heart. But out of the corner of my eye, you can always see people who aren’t paying attention. Or people looking around or looking at their phones. When we watch the anthems when we are at a game or watching it on tv, we always look for that sort of thing as well. Are we supposed to stand while watching the anthem from our living room? This whole thing came to a head this last Sunday. Last Friday night the president was campaigning for Luther Strange who was running for Senate in Alabama. A bit off topic, this is what he said, “Wouldn’t you love to see one of those NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, “Get that SOB off the field right now. Out! He’s fired. He’s fired! You know some owner is going to do that. He’s going to say, that guy that disrespects our flag, he’s fired. And that owner, they don’t know it but they’ll be the most popular person in this country.” Fast forward two days, and everybody expects something to happen. So how did we get here in the first place.

It all started with Colin Kaepernick. He was born to a 19-year- old single white mother. His African American father had left the picture before he was born. His mother was not able to take care of him, so he was adopted by the Kaepernick’s, a white family from Milwaukee that eventually moved to California. Colin has many religious tattoos, A cross, scrolls with phrases like, To God be the Glory, Heaven Sent, God will guide me etc. Here is what he said about his faith, “My faith is the basis from where my game comes from. I’ve been very blessed to have talent to play the game that I do and be successful at it. I think God guides me through every day and helps me take the right steps. When I step on the field, I always say a prayer, say I am thankful to be able to wake up that morning and go out there and try to glorify the Lord with what I do on the field. I think if you go out and do that, no matter what you do on the field you can be happy about what you did.”

His faith is not just about making him happy. It has turned him into an activist and philanthropist. He raised money to send to people suffering from the famine in Somalia. He pledged to donate $1 million dollars this year to justice causes. We know that is not what makes him famous. Last year he refused to stand during the playing of the national anthem. He said this, “I am not going to stand up and show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.” So he took a knee. We know what happens next. He becomes the most hated man in the game. People post videos burning his jersey. He received death threats. He put his career on the line and is now a free agent. There it began. Was he right to do that? Will it accomplish anything. Maybe our reading from Exodus can help.

The Israelites were in the wilderness following Moses. They came to a place to camp and there was no water. We usually think of these people as complainers. They have been delivered by God from the slavery in Egypt. They complained, Why did you bother bringing us out of Egypt just to die our here? Moses pleads with God, What shall I do with these people? They are ready to stone me. So God instructs him to take some elders and go to the rock at Horeb. Take your staff along. Strike the rock and water will come out of it. In typical Old Testament fashion, the place was named. Massah and Meribah. Where the people tested and quarreled with the Lord. They were wondering if the Lord was with them or not.

Is the Lord with them or not, might be what Kaepernick and other African American NFL players are asking. Sure, they are millionaires. But they still have to worry about the things that people of color have to worry about. They will be followed when shopping at a store. They have a higher chance of being shot during a traffic stop because of the color of their skin. Where is their rock they may think? When is this thirst for justice going to be quenched? What will we have to do for you all to believe us? That is what these players were trying to do. Show that this is a problem for people of color. And using their fame to do it.

So back to last Sunday afternoon. Teams around the league came up with different strategies for during the anthem. You saw some teams stand on the field linking arms together with everyone standing. Even some owners came down and did it with them. You saw some teams linking arms with a few players kneeling in between them. Some teams decided to stay in the locker room. Every camera was placed on these guys. My dad was at the Green Bay vs Cincinatti game. From his angle you couldn’t see what was going on. Except for a lot of photographers on their knees. No booing that he heard. What a scene. It got the whole country talking.

Many think that politics has no place in football. It should be an apolitical three hour or more break each Sunday from the chaos of modern politics. But of course politics will bleed over into the games. We can’t expect people to not express their feelings and minds. Besides our church services, sports have become a modern day religious phenomenon. The stadium has replaced the sanctuary for many, especially American men. You walk into a stadium and it does feel like a sanctuary of sorts. I feel this every time I walk into Lambeau Field, home of my Green Bay Packers. A beautiful bowl of history. You get goosebumps just walking in. It, like the church is where I had some of my best childhood memories. When I was born, one of the first things that my father did was put me on the season ticket waiting list. I am now number 231. People say they go to games religiously, perhaps more religiously than church. Here is what theologian Randall Balmer had to say about the modern game, “Stadiums provide an alternate universe, a kind of safe haven or subculture, a place of refuge from the outside world. For the white American, middle-class male (the primary patron of games), the contest itself offers a welcome contrast to the larger world, because here, inside the arena, the rules are clear and impartially enforced. Everyone knows his or her place, so.. the unsavory corollary is that women are relegated to the sidelines and the only acceptable place of self-expression for men of color is within the well-regulated universe of the playing field.” Wow. So we can see how effective these protests were. Striking deep in the heart of a national almost religion. Politics were always in our sports.

We saw the reactions that took place to these protests. People went on social media burning their teams gear and vowing to never watch the NFL again. People in Wisconsin were threating to turn in their season tickets. I say to you, go ahead, and I will be that much closer on the list. People kept saying how offensive it was to veterans. How about asking a veteran yourself? Alejandro Villanueva, tackle for the Steelers and an Army Ranger was pictured standing for the anthem by himself in the tunnel while his team was in the locker room. He was heralded as a hero. But that was not his intention. His jersey sales skyrocketed. He did not want to be a distraction. He unintentionally left his teammates behind. The league turned this into some vague notion of unity. That people were standing or kneeling as a team. In unity from the divisive remarks of our president. Yuck. That was not what these protests were intended for. The NFL used it for marketing and making a buck. What a mess. The protest called for people to choose sides. It was about police brutality and mistreatment of people of color. Now it was turned into some unity thing against the president’s remarks. One very powerful silent protest that seemed to go unnoticed was by singer Jordan Sparks who is African American. She was signing the national anthem before the Dallas Cowboys and Arizona Cardinals game. She had Proverbs 31:8-9 written on her hand. It says this: Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Maybe we and the league were like the chief priests. We can’t take sides on this. Maybe they wanted to use Jesus as a branding opportunity. But Jesus kept going. Turned their question on its head. What will it take for you to believe that I am the messiah? Just like the question the protesters were asking. What will it take for you to believe that we are treated differently because of the color of our skin?

We approach the table today on world communion Sunday. When people of different races, languages, beliefs will all take the same sacrament on the same day. What a powerful message for such a time as this. What if someone came to our church and protested? What if they said I will not take communion until all are included and accepted as people of God? Would we listen? How would we react? Probably would shock us and revolt us. That isn’t how you should protest it. Do it another way. But that is the way the conversation gets started. Exactly where our monuments are built. Either on the football field or in the church. Can we have the courage to have that conversation? Will we believe what is happening? Will we let those suffering from racism to find their rock? Will we get out of the way? As we remember Christ’s sacrifice for us today, this is a powerful symbol. That we pledge our allegiance to Christ first. Then to our flag or national anthem. We know that the flag and the anthem is very important to many people. That is why this protest stings so much. These players love America too. They just want themselves and others to have the chance to experience the same freedoms. If we put Christ first, we can realize that many of these men who are protesting did the same. They are trying to make us believe just as Jesus did. Will we? Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Matthew 21:23-32**

**The Authority of Jesus Questioned**

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’ 24Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. 25Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” 26But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’ 27So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

**The Parable of the Two Sons**

28 ‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” 29He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went. 30The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go. 31Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.