

## **How we treat each other matters to God**

**Preached by The Rev. Mary Keenan**

**September 13, 2020, 15th Sunday after Pentecost**

**Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.  
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

For much of this spring and summer, while deprived of basketball, baseball, tennis, and even the Olympics, much of the nation and the world has been engaged in another sport: Changing each others minds. Even now that some of these sports are creeping back - including Longhorn football - we are still enthralled with competitive changing of minds.

If you watch the news or listen to radio or engage in social media you have been a participant in this activity - even if you feel like you are just watching. It's hard not to take sides or feel pulled into the arguments.

To mask or not to mask? How much should we gather or isolate?

Can you support Black Lives Matter and law enforcement?

How should we be teaching and caring for our children now - in person, at home, both?

What is an essential worker? What do we owe them?

It seems as if no matter where we turn, we are being recruited to or vilified by a Team that is playing a game called I AM RIGHT AND YOU ARE WRONG. We've entered the most intense phase of our national political season and it is a bit like the Olympics for this game of I AM RIGHT AND YOU ARE WRONG.

Everyone wants to know, "what team are you on?" Or, "what team are you against?" And we are encouraged to see one another as either allies or enemies. The purpose of other people is limited to how they help or hurt your team. There is no conversation, it is just two sides broadcasting their points.

The gold medal in this sport is a kind of civic righteousness. You get to claim you are right, you gain verbal dominance, and your team is reassured that its opinions and behaviors have made them winners. Equally important, your victory makes someone else a loser.

I am not much of an athlete, but even I get caught up in this team sport. When someone argues with me it is so easy to surround myself with people who agree and together loudly denounce the opposition. Every social and political outlet has coaches who teach the rest of us how to engage in this sport effectively. And by effectively, they mean denigrating and defeating another person, an enemy.

It is into this arena that Paul in his letter to the Romans and Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew give us a different way to engage with each other and the world. They remind us that we are invited to be part of a different team. A different sport altogether.

The key thing to remember if you are on Team Jesus is this: how we treat each other matters to God.

Our team, Team Jesus, plays by a radically different set of rules and the game is called Love. Winning is not the goal of this game. One rule that Paul outlines for this game of Love is called Welcome. He notes that members of the community of Jesus followers have been criticizing each other, trying to one-up each other based on their opinions and religious behaviors.

They are playing I AM RIGHT AND YOU ARE WRONG. They are playing the wrong game, so Paul reminds them of the rule of Welcome. Paul does not focus here on how right or wrong anyone is, he tells them they are all facing the wrong direction, playing the wrong game. "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's," he writes. On this team, we don't tear each other down. We welcome other disciples to our community because God welcomes them.

Welcome is not about tolerance. On Team Jesus, we don't just put up with each other. We welcome others, including those very different from ourselves, because first God welcomed us. If God welcomes us, who are we to disdain others? We have received so much welcome from God that we will never run out, no matter how many people we welcome onto our team.

This idea of welcome, of radical hospitality flies in the face of the messages we hear all day every day from the game the rest of the world is playing. This is not the politics of destruction or the demonization of an enemy. Paul reminds us that people can hold different views from each other and STILL BE GOOD FAITHFUL PEOPLE. We can be on the same team, because the goal of the game is not to be better than each other, or even to be right. The game and the goal is Love.

We love the God who loves us. And love those whom God loves.

Jesus teaches us another aspect of this game of Love. Forgiveness. Peter asks Jesus, "if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" Peter and the other disciples have been following Jesus for a while now. Just before asking this question, Jesus has instructed them how to handle the sins within their community. There is a process of accountability and repentance.

So Peter wants to know, how many times do we have to do this? A lot? And Jesus, like Paul, says, "You aren't playing the right game." There is no limit to forgiveness. No scorekeeping. In fact, you have so much forgiveness from God, you can forgive someone all day every day and never run out of forgiveness.

Now this is a hard rule to swallow, especially if you've ever been a victim of a violent, corrosive sin. Abuse or addiction or racism...How does forgiveness fit in when how we treat each other matters to God? It is important to remember a few things about forgiveness. It happens in community and involves acknowledging the wrong, being held accountable for the wrong, and repenting of the wrong - turning around. And it includes care for those who have been hurt. This is hard work.

Team Jesus is a forgiving people. Not because we forget or don't care or because it is easy. It is not! We forgive in the context of our community. Our team. We forgive because we have been forgiven. We forgive because we believe that anyone who has broken the community has a way back in.

How we treat each other matters to God. And we can know how to treat each other by how God has treated us - God welcomes each of us. God has forgiven each of us. On Team Jesus, we do the same for each other.

So, what does this mean for our everyday lives as we encounter the conflicts and competitions of the world around us? Today and tomorrow and the next day, we will still face the ongoing game of I AM RIGHT AND YOU ARE WRONG. How can we be on Team Jesus and still engage with a world that is so focused on pitting us against each other?

Of course we will still engage the world, yet we still have to choose which team we're one. That choice will inform everything else in our lives. As you engage with the world, remember: how we treat each other matters to God.

If you choose to play I AM RIGHT AND YOU ARE WRONG, then the rules of that game will also inform your faith life; you will be focused on competitive piety and ruthless righteousness. This is not good team building, to say the least.

If you choose to be on Team Jesus, then your life in the world will be informed by your practice of Welcome and Forgiveness. You will be focused on God first and making a life of giving to others what you have received. On this team, you will treat everyone else as beloved.

If you find yourself trying to win by treating everyone else as a loser, criticizing their choices to make your own behaviors look superior, then I invite you to leave that game and join Team Jesus. You will be welcomed. You will be forgiven. And you will get the chance to give those gifts to as many other beloved brothers and sisters as you can.

AMEN.