

Seventh Sunday after Trinity

St. Mark 8:1-9

July 26, 2020

The Washington Redskins announced recently that they're changing their name. For this season, they'll be known as the Washington Football Team, which is actually more creative than their style of play.

The name change comes amid the destruction of statues across the land. Stoking the fires of racial and religious division, Shaun King called for the destruction of statues and stained glass images of Jesus and His mother. These Christian symbols are "tools of oppression" and "racist propaganda."

The fervor behind such iconoclasm is rooted in a new fundamentalism. Nathanael Blake calls it "symbolic purges of the inherited wickedness of the past." Language of "inherited wickedness" immediately gets my attention; instead of using the term "original sin," the Lutheran Confessions preferred the term "inherited sin" (*erbsünde* in German).

But original sin is making a comeback in the language of the culture wars. Jim Wallis recently wrote a book called *America's Original Sin*, with the subtitle *Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*. There are plenty of places to study and debate the meaning of America and her founding principles. The pulpit is not the appropriate vehicle for that. But Wallis is making a specifically theological statement – that racism and white privilege are America's "original sin." His mistake is not in being too radical. He's not radical enough.

The problem is not in America's founding. The problem—the original sin—is far deeper, and far more perverse and corrupt than we imagine. Symbolic purges won't cleanse our sins. Smashing statues cannot liberate us from our origins. Changing the name of the local football team is a marketing strategy. It may propitiate the mob for a time, but there is no redemption there.

Our inherited wickedness goes back deeper than 1776, 1619, or 1492. It stretches back beyond the tyranny of popes and emperors, beyond the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt, beyond even the wickedness that precipitated the great flood of the ancient world.

We inherited the wickedness of our first parents. Their crime was not in eating fruit. Their original sin was in turning away from the Creator's Word and purpose. Our first father rejected who God made him to be. The Antifa anarchists trying to burn down our cities have nothing on him. Adam is the original anarchist.

But even if we could go all the way back and find a statue of Adam, pull it down and smash it to bits, we still would not purge ourselves of the original sin. The inherited wickedness is not so easily removed. It is in us.

"We didn't start the fire," Billy Joel sang, but he's wrong. Adam was the entire human race. We sinned in him. The contagion of his rebellion flows through our veins. It's why you lust, why you are greedy; it's the source of your narcissism, your anger, your love of gossip.

We can pull down all the statues, burn all the cities, and we still won't have eradicated the problem. The problem is in us. Our Lutheran Confessions put it this way:

Knowledge of original sin is a necessity. For we cannot know the magnitude of Christ's grace unless we first recognize our malady. The entire righteousness of the human creature is sheer hypocrisy before God unless we admit that by nature the heart is lacking love, fear, and trust in God. [AP II.33, K/W]

The entire righteousness of the human creature—i.e., everything that you think is good about yourself—is sheer hypocrisy. You accuse others of lawlessness, but the lawlessness is in you every time you disregard God's Law.

In today's Epistle reading, God's Word describes our natural condition "**as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness.**" All

the things that have enslaved you – the anxiety, the lust, the seething resentment – what did it profit you? It leaves you with nothing. All the devil’s promises are empty. All the world’s allurements are traps. We humans have not just fallen into bad behavior; we’ve fallen into meaninglessness.

The rich splendor of the garden has become a desolate place with no food. In today’s gospel that desolate, barren land is not only the location of the 4,000 Gentiles who came to Jesus. It’s symbolic of our world-situation. Fears of nuclear annihilation or ecological catastrophe are a projection of what our world already is: A wasteland. We’ve wasted our world, we’ve wasted the life God gave us.

The line “teenage wasteland” in The Who’s *Baba O’Riley* was inspired by Woodstock; Pete Townshend describes “the absolute desolation of teenagers at Woodstock, where audience members were strung out on acid and 20 people [suffered] brain damage.” It’s a teenage wasteland; they’re all wasted. Fifty years later, we’ve lost our motivation to even send our kids to school. But these are mere symptoms.

T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* is more comprehensive: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?” No. Our corpses do not bloom. The dead stay dead. “I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”

We are in the wasteland. Exhausted. Dying. Jesus says, **“If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way.”** We’re doomed.

But here is what changes everything. Into our wasteland comes Jesus. Which is to say, into the world we’ve ruined comes God – the God who takes on our flesh. He goes into the desert. He confronts the devil. He grows hungry. He is betrayed. He stumbles. This God bleeds. This God dies.

It's all driven by the words of Jesus in today's Gospel: **"I have compassion on the multitude."** What does this mean? He has compassion on you. He knows the wickedness in you. He knows the wickedness you inherited. He knows your hypocrisy. He knows who you are, what you've done. And this is His verdict: **"I have compassion."**

That's your God. In Him is the atonement a mad, anxious world needs. He feeds the crowd with an anticipation of the Eucharist: "He took the ... loaves and gave thanks, broke them, and gave them to His disciples." All that's left is the fulfillment: "This is My body, given for you."

And He sends them home. To do what? To be faithful sons and daughters, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. That's sanctification - to live the life of God's holiness right there in your home, in your stations. **"Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life."**

You are sanctified. You are the object of Christ's compassion. You have a new name, better than any football team's: Christian. ✠INJ✠

The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts in Christ Jesus.

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