

**“A Favorite Passage”**

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I have been an adopted Iowan for 17 years and it has been a joy to be an Iowan - there are so many wonderful things. But, this past week kind of put some of that to the test. I was talking to someone who told me about it, and I went home and I looked it up online.

There was a basketball game this past week between Perry High School and Dallas Center-Grimes. Perry is an interesting community. It is rural but it is very urban. It has a very urban feel, because 48 percent of Perry High School is a minority population - many of whom are Hispanic. And on the basketball team most are Hispanic, but you also have Native American and African-American players. They were playing Dallas Center-Grimes.

All of a sudden, while the teams were out there playing, the [people in the] Dallas Center-Grimes stands were chanting, “Trump, Trump, Trump,” and then, “USA.” It made the news in the *New York Times* and in the *Washington Post*. It is pretty impressive when two little towns in Iowa can make news anywhere, but sad when it had to be for notorious reasons.

The reason they were chanting that wasn’t because they were at a Trump for President event. They were chanting it because Trump was stating things in opposition to immigration, and because most of the players were Hispanic, they were actually feeling like they were being attacked. It is so sad because no one should have to feel when they are at a school event that they are being attacked or hurt.

I don’t even blame the Dallas Center-Grimes students. I blame the parents. And, sadly, I’m concerned with the faculty (especially the administration) because, I have yet - and I have looked everywhere [to see where the administration took responsibility] I could find that they were able to get student groups together from the two schools the following week to kind of talk through this. Even some of the Dallas Center-Grimes kids were saying it was inappropriate. I was so glad to hear that. But I didn’t hear the administration taking responsibility, and holding especially the adults and the kids accountable. Where was the teachable moment? It took kids meeting with kids to have a teachable moment, but I missed the accountability. I missed the teaching moment when high schools had the opportunity to walk through this, and how to learn to treat other people with respect and dignity. I didn’t see it.

Over and over again we see people wanting to have tolerance without accountability, and it is a very difficult path that we walk; too far we want to move immediately to reconciliation without dealing with accountability.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in World War 11, before he died, made the statement and talked about “Cheap Grace.” Well, today, I want to talk about “Cheap Reconciliation.” Reconciliation without repentance is cheap reconciliation.

The Apostle Paul explained to the Corinthian church God’s history of holding people accountable as a means of making healing change in this world. Paul tells the Corinthian church a story that goes all the way back to the exodus - all the way back to Moses and the

people wandering in the wilderness - as God's example of requiring accountability, so they could move to a healing place. But people, with all of God's blessings, those people did not see that God was giving them a blessing by trying to hold them accountable. They were more about wanting their blessings because it was their right and not a gift from God. Even if the people did not live up to the covenant they made with God, they still expected God to give them everything they wanted in their time frame. Paul is saying that doesn't work in the Christian church in Corinth and around the world. But just like God gave the Israelites the necessary tools to make healthy decisions, God, through the Holy Spirit, in Christ's example does the same thing for us. We just have to accept it.

So, here is what Paul said to the early Church: The crossing of the Red Sea for Israel was like Christian baptism. Just like they washed away all of the things that kept the people from living a full faith - Pharaoh's army; we too will have everything washed away - all of the sin and impurity in our Baptism. The daily manna that fed the Israelites throughout their wilderness journey is now the body of Christ that we eat when we take Communion. The rock that Moses struck that gushed life-giving water in the dessert - that saved them from perishing - is the same blood of Christ that we take in Communion. The actual rock that Moses struck that brought forth life - that rock is Jesus himself.

The struggle that the Corinthian Church had was that they did not want to end up in the wilderness wandering for 40 years. You know if you look at the map and you look at the Sinai Peninsula, where they were wandering all of those 40 years, they had to be really bad at directions to not find their way somewhere over 40 years. Think about it.

Now the only way I can get anywhere is by GPS or bothering three people on the street and [stopping at] two gas stations to find [out] where I am going. My first church in northern Wisconsin was so remote that the directions [were rather ambiguous]. They didn't have street signs on a lot of the roads: You go to the third big pine tree and take a left at the large rock boulder, then count 13 mail boxes, and then you are almost there.

There are people I never found and nights I never made it home. I was just wandering around in the car. Some nights when Hannah was a baby and crying, Jill would say, "Take Hannah with you," because she knew she [Hannah] would sleep driving around in the car lost. [Laughter] It was terrible.

Forty years they wandered in the Sinai - that could take about six weeks tops to cross with everybody on it? But, according to Scripture, the reason why they were stuck there for 40 years, wasn't because they didn't have GPS - they were stuck there because God said, "You are not getting into the Promised Land until you behave yourselves. You are not getting into the Promised Land until you change your attitude and grow in your heart, so that you meet and do not corrupt the Promised Land." So it took them 40 years to get there. That is why it took so long.

So Paul says to the Christian church, "Learn from it. That wilderness can happen again. We are at a very difficult point." And Paul went on to describe what the problem was:

It was very simple. It was a business issue. You have the Corinthian church and a tiny group of people in this huge area of pagan people, trying to make a living.

Now, you know if you are a business person and trying to make a sale, often times you will go out and have a power lunch. But, in the ancient world when you went out and had a power lunch there wasn't a McDonald's or a fancy restaurant around every corner. The places where food was served was in the pagan temples.

Think about it. The people would bring in their animals. The priest would sacrifice the animal to the pagan god. They would burn a little of it off for the god. Then the priest would take 95 percent of it, and cut it up like a butcher shop - some could be sold and taken home, like carry-out, but others would be kept there and they would eat it there.

Now the problem is, I want to make a sale to my pagan neighbor, I want to be tolerant to my pagan neighbors both because they are nice people and I want to do business. And, all of a sudden, this apostle comes into town and says I can't eat idle meat. I can't go out and do business. It was creating conflict in the Corinthian church. Even more difficult, they were saying, "Wait a minute. You are making it look like the pagans are more tolerant and loving than we are, and we are the ones being exclusive."

Paul said, "You cannot break the second commandment. You cannot have other graven images. You have to have some level of expectation and accountability if you are going to worship God." And they were stuck.

They made this wonderful theological argument. They said, "If these pagan gods are simply pagan gods - and they are myths - then my eating their meat is not traumatizing me. It's not changing me. This thing has no power, because it doesn't exist."

Paul kind of wagged his finger and said, "It does have power. Not because it has some sort of supernatural ability. When you're eating that, your participation has power to *change* attitudes. It will assimilate us with them in a way that is inappropriate. It diminishes God, and we will never be who God claimed us to be. We have to hold you accountable to at least some level of faith, and the Ten Commandments are still relevant."

That was the struggle – and I see both sides, but, at some point accountability needs to remain, and Paul stood up for it.

Now I'm willing to bet if you polled the people sitting in the stands from Dallas Center-Grimes, the vast majority would say, "Yes, we are Christian." But in that moment they were not acting very faithfully, by diminishing, hurting and humiliating the other team's players and their families. That inappropriate chant needed some accountability. I hope and pray that they put together that what we say and what we do impacts who we are, as people of faith.

Rather than continue to tear down Dallas Center-Grimes (that is not my intention), I would like to talk about a more humane and loving way to handle situations like that - and that is through accountability. Explain the reasons to the kids, why their chants were degrading. Sometimes when you are in that moment and one starts [mocking and harassing], and you chime in, you just don't think about it. That teachable moment could very well make them [the students] change, so they don't do it in the future, and they think about it before they do something else. Just like we talked about with the kids: you use the heart muscle first and the brain. It is simple if you take the time to stop and think before you act or speak.

Repentance is still an appropriate theological word, but we don't like it because it is uncomfortable. It causes us to have to face one another. We need to seek apologies and perhaps other means of creating an atmosphere of repentance, so that accountability can occur. Then healing and wholeness are possible. As long as we are unwilling to address accountability, we just set ourselves up to re-abuse each other.

In society we have championed tolerance as such an important word - as a virtue - that we are expected to tolerate everything, even tolerating bad behavior - and we should never as Christian people tolerate that kind of behavior. And Moses, Paul and God would not agree with that kind of tolerance.

God formed covenants as a means of holding God accountable to the people and the people accountable to God. A covenant is a written document. So if it is broken, then they set it up and bring the two groups together like a court of law in the Temple. They would define what was wrong about the covenant and fix it.

We lack accountability to the point that we are totally out of control; to the point that I'm embarrassed to have any of us watching the Presidential candidates do their thing - their hate-filled language telling each other that they are liars. Where is the accountability to treat each other with respect and dignity; to teach our children how to disagree agreeably? How to get along even when we disagree?

There is no reason to not lie anymore, because if you are not held accountable you can say anything you want, and everyone is going to think it is true, as long as you say it loud enough and rudely enough, you can get away with anything anymore.

God holds us accountable in 2016 for what we say at a high school basketball game. God holds us accountable - even if no one else does - for what we spew on Facebook. God holds us accountable for telling the truth about what we say and do, no matter how loudly or rudely we say it.

And, what keeps Christians from assimilating with culture is not being more exclusive or treating ourselves as if we are better. What sets us apart is by being the most loving; and, if we can continue to do that - think before we speak and care even when we disagree - then we will model the Christian faith. Only then will real reconciliation take place. Otherwise it is all nothing but cheap reconciliation and God ain't cheap.

Amen