

**Sixth Sunday of Easter + May 6, 2018**

Sometime before the end of summer I will visit Safeco field to watch a Mariners game. I like to take in at least one game a year that is live and in person, giving the game a different feel than watching it on television. Besides, it's always better to root for your team in person. A friend asked why I would root for the Mariners and I said, "One, I live in Seattle and two, I have a soft spot in my heart for the underdog."

Who doesn't want to see their team win?

I wasn't here when the Seahawks won the Super Bowl, but I've been told that nearly a million people showed up for the victory parade. Even school was let out early so students could attend the celebration.

Who doesn't want to see their team win and who wouldn't want to join in the victory celebration, especially when your team that gets the best trophy? On that day, the Seahawks were not just stars. They were superstars.

Who doesn't enjoy the thrill of victory?

And the passion we have for a winning team is not unlike the passion we may have for a favorite political candidate or cause. On Election Day you can also experience the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat.

Who doesn't want their team or their candidate to win? Who doesn't want to be on the top of their game, to enjoy favored status, or have the candidate win who they believe will make a difference in the world?

We love celebrity. We like our stars and especially like our superstars.

Sometimes winning on a large scale is about life and death. Beyond reaching superstar status we may find ourselves in the position of being a superpower, protecting our land or our tribe. In that case, winning becomes a matter of conquering the enemy.

During this great season of Easter, basking in the joy of the Resurrection, we've been singing "This is the Feast of Victory for our God." It's a victory song. There are a slew of other Easter hymns that say the same thing:

- "The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done"
- "This is the Glory, Risen, Conquering Lord"
- "Christ Has Triumphed, Alleluia!"

Some of the visual images of the Risen Jesus depict him as victor. One of the more famous shows Jesus resting a foot on a sarcophagus while he holds a white flag on the ground and he looks beaten and embattled. It is as if Christ were posing as the victor after a long and arduous battle.

It is as if these pictures are saying Jesus won or Jesus conquered.

And if that is so, doesn't it apply to us as well?

Jesus, after all, calls us his friends.

The second lesson today from 1 John seems to say so, that whoever is born of God conquers the world and the victory that conquers the world is our faith. "Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

Belief in Christ, faith in Jesus conquers the world!

When I was a kid, growing up in the church, I distinctly remember singing, more than once, "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war ..." At the time I didn't think much of it, but now the thought of singing the hymn makes me cringe. (You will not find it in our current worship book) Over time, I grew to see a disconnect between the way of Jesus and the way of warriors. Triumphalism aided by violence is a mark of a broken world, but not the mark of what the church is called to be in the world. Now, of course, this has not stopped the church from adapting these images and even endorsing bloody crusades or acting in controlling ways, but that is not our calling.

So, what on earth does it mean for the people of Jesus to be conquering and what is this "feast of victory" of which we sing at every Easter Eucharist?

Well, I can say with great confidence, that evil is conquered and death is swallowed up in the victory of the Risen Christ. We can have a conversation that would last for hours on the Resurrection of Christ conquering death and evil but mercifully I don't have a few hours this morning. What I can say is this: It often happens that in the Christian tradition we will use words or images to mean something very different than the way that word or image ordinarily functions. Jesus radically reinterprets our words and our signs and our symbols to speak something new, breaking not only the old meanings but the old worlds in which they were constructed.

In other words, evil and death are conquered through the newness of love, not with a sword or a weapon, and not by coercion or manipulation. The Risen Christ seeks to melt away the categories of "winners and losers" and to erase lines drawn in the sand marking out boundaries or permitting large walls to be constructed.

Victory, in Easter terms, is about love having the first and last word.

We will not see it in its fullness, this send of Christ's coming again. Walls will be built, weapons wielded, distinctions made, violence done when we cling to the familiar ways that perpetuate an old order of domination. Jesus' persistent and restless call is to practice love. The journey of faith is to trust in this holy work and somehow keep up with what God is doing to heal and redeem the world. It is love that conquers the world.

Some years back, a popular Christian teacher named Rob Bell made the news with his book called *Love Wins*. While many welcomed his book and praised his writing, just as many were not pleased with the book at all. In fact, some accused Rob Bell of heresy. That's a serious charge. Heresy means something quite contrary to orthodox Christian belief and those who charge heresy are the practitioners of the religion.

One of things Rob Bell said in the book that got folks all riled up, is proposing the possibility of universal salvation. You know, the idea that in the end, all will be saved. No one consigned to hell. I kind of liked the book. I don't think that's heresy. I think it's quite consistent with a hope and vision put forth in the scriptures. It's all up to God, and the hope and the vision is just that.

What's interesting to me is how clinging to such a hope would be so irritating to so many believers. Why would Christian folk get irate over the great vision of God's love reconciling the entire world? Perhaps there is something within us that believes it is not possible, but don't underestimate God or God's Holy Spirit.

Our call, friends in Christ, isn't to speculate on such things but to practice God's love now and to continue to learn from Jesus this language of love.

In the first lesson for today, Peter, fresh from a vision of God's impartial love, is preaching to a mixed group of Jews and Gentile. As Peter preaches, something astonishing happens. The Holy Spirit falls upon everyone in the room and the "circumcised believers," that is, those who were ensconced in the religious traditions, were astonished to see that God's Spirit fell even on the Gentiles, those outside the tradition! Yes, even them!

This is the sort of thing the Spirit likes to do – upending our notions of who is in and who is out and distracting us from the preoccupation of having winners and losers.

The writer of 1 John tells us that we can get in on the Spirit's work by also loving the world this way. And these commands are not burdensome. Now, that doesn't mean love is easy, but there is much freedom when we live without the burden of needing to be right or propping up all the old and destructive systems that seek to belittle people or exploit others or feed hatred.

Elsewhere in the scriptures we learn that love is patient and kind. Love may not fix things but it will conquer the world. Or, say it like this – change and transform the world. And if we continue to sit at the feet of Jesus, we will learn that love extends to the one we regard as enemy and it love looks a whole lot like laying down one’s life for one’s friend.

Today in the great prayer of Thanksgiving at the table we will pray for that God’s love will “rule all in all.” We pray this with our hearts lifted up and oriented toward the future, looking to that day when Christ will come again to make all things new.

Yet, even as we wait for its fullness, we know something of its power already. God is doing a new thing and we get to see it and perceive it and be surprised by it when we practice the vocation of love.

And so we sing of a “feast of victory.” For the “Lamb who was slain has begun his reign.” Do you see? God rules through self-giving love and Jesus calls you back again to himself and to each other as we feast on bread and cup. It is love freely given and shared. We are fed by the hand of the holy God who makes all things new.

Christ is raised indeed! Alleluia!