

We have been reading through the gospel of Matthew over the past few weeks. Today we turn to a couple of stories which are found in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter. I am going to expand what I read from what is printed in the bulletin because these two stories impact one another.

As you all know we as a country have been in a national debate over the appropriateness of kneeling or sitting out the national anthem. What started with Colin Kaepernick sitting down and then kneeling at NFL games last year has now spread to where about 200 NFL players carried out this form of protest last Sunday.

I am going to invite us into the two Scriptures today to try to provide some context to what is happening and how we as Christians are invited to respond. In no way am I saying that this is the only way to look at this controversy. But I hope that what I share will provide some light and, hopefully, not darkness to the situation.

The two Scriptures we are reading in worship today are both Scriptures from the lectionary or the scriptures assigned for the day. I am going to trust that both Scriptures have something to say to us and our country.

**(Philippians 2:1-13)**

**Matthew 21:12-16, 23-32**

Wil Willimon, who now teaches in the Divinity School at Duke University, shares the story of the first church he served as pastor. In his words he says, "I was a student at Emory at the time. I drove out to the church on Saturday to meet with the lay leader. He met me at the little one room church, then named, "Friendship Methodist Church"

Willimon continues. "I got there before my host so I thought I'd go in the church and look around. But I was surprised by a big padlock and chain barring the front door. When the lay leader arrived I said, "Glad you are here to open the lock on the door."

"Oh, that ain't our lock. The sheriff put that there," explained the lay leader. "Things got rough here at the congregational meeting last month. Folks started yelling at one another, carting off furniture they had given to the church. So, I called the sheriff and he came out here and put that lock on the door until the new preacher could get here and settle the church down."

Many of us feel that events in our country have led us to the point where we are like that church. What to do with the national anthem is creating a wedge between people that otherwise respect and admire one another. We in this country have become ultra-sensitive and looking for reasons to attack one another.

I had to deal this week with a local situation which reflects this national conflict. I serve as the chair of the board for Clover Area Assistance Center or CAAC which is the hunger relief agency for the area within the Clover school district. Last week Clover High School and York Comprehensive High School had a competition to see who could raise the most canned goods for PATH in York and CAAC in Clover.

Two female students from Clover High delivered the large supply of canned goods that were collected by the students. Their picture was taken and this picture was posted on the Facebook page of CAAC. Immediately after posting the picture several comments arrived on the Facebook page criticizing what the students were wearing.

Emails were sent to the school principal and to the district superintendent about the picture. The shirts that the students were wearing that created the controversy were Trump t-shirts. CAAC was accused of trying to make a political statement by posting the picture of the 2 students with the canned goods.

There are two very different reactions to the NFL protests that are being carried out. CNN reported this week that in a poll they did 59% of white respondents said that the protests were wrong while 82% of African-Americans felt the protests were correct. This racial breakdown in reaction of the protests is like what I have heard in my conversations around York County and Allison Creek.

It is at this point that I invite the biblical narrative into this conversation. As I reflected on the narrative of the Bible I immediately began to think about the characters in the Bible that have protested the actions of government leaders. I immediately thought about the Old Testament book of Daniel and the three men Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

In that story, King Nebuchadnezzar built a large golden statue. The king commanded that horns and other musical instruments would be played and the people were to bow down and worship the golden statue. The king's actions were not really about a statue.

The king's actions were a sign of power and control. He wanted to make it very clear that he was the one who was the most powerful and everyone in the land needed to submit to his power and his control. But in the story that is recorded for us in the book of Daniel, there are at least 3 guys who had the courage to say that God was the true source of authority and that it was in God where they were going to place their trust.

These three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse the orders from the king and are thrown into a fiery furnace. However, as the story is recorded, the three men do not burn up. They are instead joined by a fourth figure who stands with them in solidarity. The protest against the injustice of the king and his claim of authority is upheld by the biblical writers as an example of what God calls us to do.

There are other similar stories like this found in the Bible. The story of Esther in the Old Testament is the story of a protest against injustice by governing authorities. The prophets throughout the Old Testament were people who protested the injustices carried out by the authorities.

The story of Moses and his challenge to the king of Egypt to let God's people go is a 40-year protest march against injustice and enslavement. We read this morning about Jesus overturning tables in the Temple as his protest to what people were doing to God's House.

But when I learned the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and Moses in Sunday School in the all-white Trinity Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC these stories were never presented to me as stories of protest. Never were these stories of the Old Testament prophets, Moses, Esther, and others presented as stories of protest and challenge of government authority.

These stories were never presented that way to me because that would have been a challenge to the way our world was set up. I was never taught that these biblical characters were speaking up to injustice. I was taught that they were models of faith because they trusted God and followed God.

There are two narratives that are competing right now about the national anthem protests. If we adopt one of these narratives then it will tear us apart as a nation. If we adopt the second narrative, I believe, we will come together like Paul urges us to do in the letter he wrote to the Philippians.

The first narrative is this. And this is the narrative that will tear us apart as a country. The first narrative is that the people protesting hate the US flag and they hate veterans and military service members and they hate America.

If we adopt this narrative then we will continue to choose sides and demonize the other. If you stand with America and its national symbols then stand against the protestors. If you stand against America then kneel with the protestors.

This is the narrative that some very powerful people want us to adopt because it keeps us divided and it keeps them in power. I recently heard that Hitler set out to divide the German people because if Germany was divided then he could come in and take over. So, do we want to follow this narrative? Many people in power want us to. They want us to fight against one another.

But there is a second narrative that is trying to be heard. It is a narrative that people who believe Proverbs 31:8-9 follow. This verse was on the hands of one of the singers last Sunday as she sang the national anthem at an NFL game.

### **Read Proverbs 31:8-9**

The second narrative is that we are not a perfect union and that we can be better. The second narrative is that we acknowledge our imperfections and commit to work together to improve the lives of all people. The second narrative is that there is injustice and we commit together to listen intently to one another and band together to overcome the injustice.

This week I heard a very powerful speech by Air Force Lt. General Jay Silveria. He was speaking to some racist graffiti that had appeared at the Air Force Prep School in Colorado where he is the superintendent. The General compared small idea thinking with big idea thinking. Writing racist graffiti was small idea thinking. Working together with a diverse group of people to create something good is big idea thinking.

Channeling his thoughts, to adopt the first narrative is small idea thinking. If we adopt the first narrative, that these protests are about the flag and veterans, then this is small idea thinking. But as a country and as Christian Americans we are better and stronger than that.

We are invited to be a part of big idea thinking. We are invited to be people to adopt the second narrative and recognize that there is injustice in the world. We work to listen to one another and then work together to overcome this injustice.

I can tell you that most people I know have already adopted the first narrative. Many of us here have probably adopted the first narrative and my words will probably make little difference.

But we can be different. We can be the ones who take on the courage of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Moses, Esther, Morticah and others in the Bible who have taught us a better and stronger way.

In the story that we read from Matthew, Jesus tells the religious leaders that they are all talk. That they say one thing but their actions betray their words. Jesus then says to them that they are going to have to get in the back of the line because it is the tax collectors and prostitutes who are going to the front of the line because they are putting faith into action.

So which narrative are you going to adopt? The one that tears us apart? Or the one that brings us together to work for something important and good?

Be mindful of this question as we come together as one to share Holy Communion. AMEN.

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-Willimon, Wil, Day 1, [http://day1.org/7975-will\\_willimon\\_one\\_in\\_christ](http://day1.org/7975-will_willimon_one_in_christ)

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