

Sunday September 7 – Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Ezekiel 33:7-11

7 So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. **8** If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. **9** But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life. **10** Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" **11** Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Psalms 119:33-40 (35)

33 Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end. **34** Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. **35** Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. **36** Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain. **37** Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways. **38** Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who fear you. **39** Turn away the disgrace that I dread, for your ordinances are good. **40** See, I have longed for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life.

Romans 13:8-14

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. **9** The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." **10** Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. **11** Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; **12** the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; **13** let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. **14** Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 18:15-20

15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. **16** But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17** If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. **18** Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. **19** Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. **20** For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Prayer of the Day

O Lord God, enliven and preserve your church with your perpetual mercy. Without your help, we mortals will fail; remove far from us everything that is harmful, and lead us toward all that gives life and salvation, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Sermon – Uniforms, Teams, and Identity in Christ

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

Well, it's my first Sunday as your pastor, and my first Sunday as an ordained minister to boot. We've already learned a bit about one another, though I admit, I am still trying my best to get all names and faces together, so please forgive me if I need to ask your name. What you all may not yet know about me is that I am an avid sportsfan. Football, basketball, baseball, volleyball, even curling – I love it all. Some people love sports because of the competition, or the skill, or the excitement of plays, or big hits, or just winning.

One of the most intriguing aspects about sport, though, is the nature of being on a team. To belong to a team gives you a sort of character that is impossible without the other people involved. You have a joint work to do. You share a common purpose. You even wear similar clothing. Teams unite otherwise entirely unrelated people into a sort of family. The beautiful thing about teams is that they share an identity.

The concept of identity plays a significant role in today's Romans passage. As Paul writes to the church at Rome, a church he has never visited, made up of people he hardly knows, he tries to convey to them the importance of their identity in

Christ. Paul is writing a manifesto of sorts about how to become a truly Christian community.

Now, it seems pretty bold to write to a community you've never attended and tell them how to truly become a church. A relatively young person, at least young in his faith, and he decides that the entire church of Rome needs a Christianity 101 class. What if your new pastor had done this? To me, at least, that would appear pretty presumptuous, as though this new pastor believed she was the sole authority on what church should be like.

But if we look closer, Paul isn't talking about how to organize the church – about what committees to have or how to renovate the sanctuary or how to use the endowment – but rather about the very core of

the church's identity across space and time, the kind of thing that stays constant from Rome to Melbourne, from the Middle Ages to the present day. And what Paul talks about is love, because love is the baseline of our common identity in Christ.

Owe nothing to one another, says Paul – and let me tell you, that's a hard command to hear from someone who is taking out a mortgage right now! Owe nothing to one another, **except love**. Now, in our society, we are all too used to debt. To owing someone something. Money. Interest. Late fees. And even more than finances! We feel like we owe favors. When someone helps us, we feel like we owe recompense. In a very real sense, we live within a debtors society.

The immense problem with this is that we let our debts define us. Y'all will find out soon enough that I'm a huge fantasy and science fiction fan – aliens and time travel, dystopian futures and zombies, magic of all sorts – all of it. I'm a nerd, and strangely comfortable with that. But one of the key reasons I love the genre is because science fiction attempts to tell the truth in a way that we can grasp. One particular show that I watch is called Continuum. The key plotline within is that the future is controlled by corporations, who hold the rest of society in check through massive debt. Everyone from the government to the military to public services to the food producers are all in debt to, and therefore serve, the corporations of the world.

Now, of course this seems somewhat absurd. But then again, 1% of the world's population controls half of the resources worldwide. Since 2009, the wealthiest one percent of the U.S. population captured 95 percent growth after the recession, while the bottom 90 percent – people like you and me – have actually become poorer. Financial debt is growing, and controlled by fewer and fewer people. That amount of power in the hands of so few creates a vast inequality, and so soon we begin to judge ourselves as less worthy because we have less money. We let debt define who we are.

On a team, however, this is not the way that things are run. Whether you're the starting quarterback or the backup placekicker, you win or

lose together. Everyone wears the same jersey. No matter how much you contribute, everyone gets a Super Bowl ring, but not matter how much you contribute, everybody only gets one. Contributions are different, but the results are shared. Teams don't hold one another in debt, but share an identity, a purpose, a mission.

Paul describes that mission, that purpose, that identity as love, and in light of that love, tells us all to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. This imagery of putting something on is powerful because it gets at how we can inhabit, how we can live within, this love. When you put on a jersey, you choose to lay aside other allegiances and instead embody the identity of that team. For instance, as a Buckeyes fan in Virginia Tech

country, when I choose to put on the jersey, I choose to embrace this identity over the loud sounds of Hokie cries.

But seriously, what are we choosing when we put on Jesus Christ? And what are we choosing to forsake?

We are choosing, in the words of Luther, to remember our baptism and be thankful. In this week's congregational email I shared this story about Luther. Every time he bathed or washed his hands, he recalled his own baptism and reminded himself that he was a child of God, that he belonged to God and to no one else. In everyday water, Luther put on the identity of Jesus. This is a wonderful practice to help us daily remember to put on Christ.

But we must also remember that putting on Christ means embracing change. We cannot put on Christ and expect to stay the same. We cannot put on Christ and continue to wallow in our selfish habits. To put on Christ is to choose God's leadership over our own, to choose God's way over our ways, to remember that, in Paul's words, love is the fulfilling of the law, that love does no wrong to a neighbor.

If we put on Christ, that means we put on love. And that means, whatever we do, we must refuse the temptations of the world that wrong our neighbors. This means everything from not cutting off other drivers to not yelling at others when we disagree with them. Love does no wrong to a neighbor. This means turning the other cheek, not

retaliating when someone does wrong by us, because love does no wrong to a neighbor. We cannot let debt define our relationship with someone, because love does no wrong to a neighbor.

But this doesn't just mean avoiding things we shouldn't do. It means that our behavior must reorient toward justice. We must make positive steps toward transformation. We must speak out against the oppressive weight of debt. We must speak out against the racial inequalities that are still all too prevalent within our society. We must give to those who ask, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, heal the sick, befriend the outcasts, and forgive the sinners because, if we put on Christ, we

must become more Christlike. These things are not negotiable aspects, but as the actions of Christ, each is central to the identity of love. Christ is love, and to put on the Lord is to love in the way Jesus showed us in life, death, and resurrection.

How might we here at Christ Lutheran Church put on the Lord Jesus Christ? You've begun that process already. You've committed to renovating your sanctuary into a flexible space, usable not only for Sunday morning worship, but for serving this community throughout the rest of the week. This would be impossible without changing the space. You've committed to reaching out to the mission field of Radford University. This would be impossible without changing our behavior and how we allocate

our resources. And y'all know this because you have been through the beginning stages of it already.

Moving away from pews and toward chairs is a big change, but it is one that can help introduce Jesus to a new generation of people who might otherwise never enter a church. Committing to reach out to the university community is a huge responsibility that will require time and energy and resources, but also one that reflects the image of the God who came to live amongst us in order to serve us.

You've even called a pierced, tattooed, spikey haired pastor. In this, just like in the chairs and in the campus outreach, you've committed to embrace change in the hopes of renewal at the hands of God. But just like washing our hands, to put on Christ is a

daily commitment. To become more like Christ, to love our neighbors and do them no wrong, we must daily remember our baptism. We must embrace over and over the death of the old and the resurrection of the new in Christ Jesus. We cannot stop here and assume that we are done with the work God has called us to together. We are, quite literally, only just beginning. We must daily choose to work together, to wear the jersey that is Jesus, to become much more than a team, but brothers and sisters with the shared identity of Christ.

How do we do this? In everything, we love one another. Owe nothing, absolutely nothing to one another, but love. No envy. No payback. No animosity. No distrust. Just love. That's how we know,

even in the midst of change of new seats and new ministries, that God is with us. Together, let's learn to put on Christ and love one another.