

Sermon – Matthew 21:23-32
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“By Faith Alone”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Did you catch the football game the other night? Did you think I would let it pass that the Packers dismembered the Bears on national television this past Thursday? Well, I wasn't about to miss the opportunity to mention it. Or to show off my socks. Of course, if you've been listening to the news about football these past few weeks, you might be surprised to learn that NFL games are still being played. After all, most of the talk about football lately has had very little to do with the game and everything to do with what's happening prior to kickoff during the national anthem. Following the example of Colin Kaepernick, who began to protest silently on his knee during the anthem last year, more and more players are taking the knee. A number of students at OPRF joined in on Friday, kneeling during the anthem. Many people are standing in support, or kneeling as it were, of these athletes and their goal of protesting continued racism and racial injustice in our country. Many others are concerned, or even offended, seeing in the anthem and the flag an opportunity to be always united, no matter what else might be going on. There are fair points here. So, we might ask: Couldn't another avenue or opportunity for protest be found? After all, it's uncomfortable to have existing divides pointed out in the midst of unifying rituals. That's the point, though, isn't it? Protests, to be effective, are not designed to keep people comfortable. They are designed to point out to the powerful, those ensconced in comfort, that there are others who continue to suffer oppression. A protest during the anthem can be uncomfortable, but the

discomfort we feel can open our eyes, our hearts, to the voices and stories of others. Protests are meant to be uncomfortable, and this has always been the case. And if nothing else, at least you Bears fans can be distracted from your quarterback controversy!

2. As Lutherans, we enter this month into the celebration of the protest movement known as the Reformation, begun in October 1517, by a German professor-monk who nailed his 95 Theses to the Castle Church door and spread discomfort among the religious and political authorities, and with discomfort, the gospel itself. Even more, as Christians we gather this day to worship the One who was born not simply to protest, but to overturn the authorities of this world. And it wasn't a comfortable process. What right did Jesus have to do such a thing? That's the question on the lips of the chief priests and elders in our reading from Matthew this morning. Why are they asking this question? Because of what Jesus has just done. Immediately preceding this text, Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem hailed as a king, flouting the delicate balance between Rome and the people of Judea. He follows that up by strolling into the Temple and overturning not simply the tables of the moneychangers but the whole system of sacrifice which they supported – after all, the moneychangers were there to make it possible for Jews to turn their Roman coins into Jewish money that could be used to purchase sacrificial animals. Jesus is doing something new, and to prove the point he, without so much as a by your leave, heals the blind and the lame in spite of the fact that they come without coin or sacrifice. He just heals them!
3. When Jesus returns to the Temple the next day, the authorities want to know who has given Jesus the right, the power, to do such things. How dare he? Things have been going just fine, Jesus, thank you very much. Why this discomfort? It's all so unbecoming. But Jesus has no interest in answering their question, in pulling out his curriculum vitae or brandishing his degrees or ordination papers. For one thing, the minds of the chief priests and the

- elders are made up; they weren't about to be convinced. More to the point, when it comes to Jesus it's not about proving who he is or where he came from. It's about Jesus himself, about seeing in Jesus the new revelation of God's saving activity for all humanity. It's not about having the truth demonstrated in eloquent words or mighty deeds. It's about faith, faith that is simply trust grabbing hold of God's grace shown in the cross, the self-emptying of God's divine power that we might simply look to Christ and *live*. Jesus doesn't tell of his authority; he shows it, and he does so by dying.
4. God knows that this is what we need, all of us. The priests and the prostitutes, the elders and the tax collectors, the healthy and the sick. To get at this, Jesus tells a parable. A father asks his two sons to go and work. One says yes, but then realizes he'd rather be playing video games. The other says no, only to show up and do the work. Which of these, Jesus asks, did the will of the father? They answer: the one who said no but went to work. It seems like the right answer. At least that son got to work! But Jesus, you'll note, doesn't comment as to whether or not that's the right answer, and I think that's because it's not. The will of the father in the parable is that both of his sons would agree to the work *and* do it, and neither son does both. In this last week of his life, Jesus is driving home the point: there are no sons or daughters of God who have measured up, who have joyfully and gladly been doing the work of the Lord. There is only one Son who has done so, and it's not either son from the parable; it's the Son who tells the parable. It is not, therefore, by our work or our words that we are welcomed into the Kingdom of God. It is by faith alone in the Son of God who has done what we have not. Paul writes in Philippians of Jesus as the One who was obedient to will of God, even unto death, and who for precisely that reason is resurrected and exalted above every name – so that every tongue should confess his lordship and every knee bow before his authority, and his alone. We get there in God's grace by faith alone.

5. In Christ, the old has been overturned. The system of temple and sacrifice is no more. Jesus has offered himself in love for us, reconstituting humanity as one family of God. All that's left for us to do is have faith in Christ, and even that's not up to us. Faith itself is a gift of the spirit, enabling us to see Jesus Christ as the One who shows authority through self-sacrifice and power through weakness. It's uncomfortable at first, because it means it's not up to us. Yet when we sink back into the graceful arms of God, together, it becomes all the comfort we need.

6. One day, Paul tells us, we'll all bend the knee and confess the lordship of Jesus. All of us. Bears fans and Packers fans together, I imagine. If that is our future reality, it is an eternal reality that shapes our moments in the meantime. It is a reality that opens us up to the lived realities of others. It means that whether one stands or kneels during anthems or before flags, or whatever we think of such protests, we know that our truest hope is not in flags or anthems or the countries they represent. Our truest hope, our only hope, is in Christ himself. It is in him that we are called to have faith – a faith strong enough to listen to one another, to hear one another's stories, to kneel or stand in solidarity with those whose voices are not being heard, and to find common cause for the common good. There is injustice and oppression in our midst. There are those who suffer, including those who suffer for no reason other than the color of their skin. And maybe talking about these things is uncomfortable. So be it. We have been saved in Christ, by grace through faith, and that's comfort enough for the people of God; comfort so strong that we can allow ourselves to be uncomfortable in this world as we seek a way forward for *all* people. We have all, by grace, been claimed by the self-giving lordship of Jesus. We can all therefore, in faith, listen to one another and work for earth to be more like the heavenly Kingdom to which we already belong. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.