

HOPE CHURCH
18TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
October 8, 2017 ~ 11:00 AM
Rivalry Week
Pastor Gordon Wiersma
Philippians 3:3-14 & Exodus 20

Some of you are very aware of a football game that was played in the state of Michigan last night – and care, a lot, about who won; some of you are unaware of pretty much any football game played anywhere, ever – and you don't care, at all, about who wins, ever. But regardless of your interest in this particular part of our culture, this is an equal opportunity sermon illustration, because the Michigan vs. Michigan State football game unabashedly and wholeheartedly uses the language of rivalry – it's a rivalry game – there are “houses divided” into Blue and Green (those are the team colors); you hear friendly competitive banter – and also you hear really intense, way over the top, even violent expressions of loyalty, which makes you realize that rivalry is something that has a whole lot of energy to it. I do not just observe it – I realize I am a part of it.

Rivalry week.

A week ago Hope Church hosted the national Room for All conference, for Reformed Church in America folks advocating for full affirmation and celebration of varied expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity. As many of you have heard, it was a wonderful event – both the fabulous hospitality of Hope Church, and mostly the meaningful content and connections that the conference provided. Wonderful – and – there was a lot of rivalry going on. There was a whole range of ideas about how best to advocate, act, speak - and in that there was a strong energy of rivalry: who is on who's side; judgment of “good” or “bad” about those sides; calculations of power and alliance at play. A lot of energy present in the rivalries – and I do not just observe it – I am a part of it. Rivalry week.

In Las Vegas last Sunday night, tragedy and horror unfolded in a violent outburst of gunfire that took nearly 60 lives and shattered 100s more. In the aftermath of such a horrific event, there was great compassion and courage shown by many in the midst of the pain and grief – and there was rivalry: sides lined up around gun control, and debates about guns and violence quickly become violent in their own right – the disparagement and diminishment of differing viewpoints descended into a familiar rut. And I do not just observe it – I realize I am a part of it.

Rivalry week.

Holland, MI. At a Holland High football game a week ago Friday, the cheerleaders took a knee as they faced the American flag during the National Anthem; just this past Friday night, half of those cheerleaders kneeled and saluted the flag during the anthem. There's been a lot of reaction and energy around that – people not only expressing their opinions about it (including a very thoughtful Sentinel editorial by the HPS superintendent this week), but deep divisions and animosities exposed. There have even been violent threats made toward these teenage young women – powerful energy in the issues at hand. And I do not just observe it – I am a part of it.

Rivalry week.

That's a lot for me to put out there to you today – and perhaps it needs to percolate a bit in you; and as it does, I want to make the case that where all of this leads us to is...the Apostle Paul! – really! – it's rivalry week in Philippians too. As I read this passage, I hear very much in Paul the energy of rivalry. Did you notice how Paul lists all of the things in his background – Israelite, Benjaminite, Hebrew, Pharisee, righteous, blameless – in order to say it's all NOT important to him; it drives me crazy when Paul does that! – it is this kind of “passive bragging” thing that Paul does that comes off to me more like a power play about his impressive pedigree. So irritating.

Except – upon further review – notice this also in Paul's pedigree list: “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church” – Paul slips into his resume the violence, death, he was responsible for in his zeal for God, when he persecuted the church before his conversion to Christianity – a shameful time in Paul's life that he puts out there. So, perhaps this is not Paul's irritating passive bragging (which still does happen other places!) – but instead Paul is ingeniously drawing us into a truth – the truth of how loyalties and identities can be warped into harm.

That's what we have to know as Paul then makes the turn in this passage to his devotion to Christ – contrasting those past loyalties with his identity in Christ. Which I know sounds lovely, but can I push back here with my own little rivalry with Paul? – Paul uses such grand language about his faith: ‘everything else loss’; ‘the surpassing value of Christ’; ‘all else rubbish’; ‘striving for righteousness and faith and heaven’. And I have to admit to you that Paul's passion can leave me feeling on the outside: faith in Christ is vital to me, but sometimes I feel as much my questions as I do Paul's passion; I care about righteousness, but sometimes I am part of the mess; I care about heaven, but what about this world? And something more: I am grateful to be part of the Body of Christ, but I care too about those who have different faiths, or none – and to me Paul's language about Christ can sound like putting others down, or outside – like rivalry.

I'm putting a lot of things out there today, and I may be going too far from home to get back in time, but I need to make one more detour before we start trying to pull it all back together. It's a detour to the 10 commandments in Exodus. And what I want to say about the 10 commandments is this: start with #10 (you shall not covet your neighbors' stuff), then go back to #1 (you shall have no other gods), and then everything else in between will be covered. That's a big claim, but that's because commandments #10 and #1 are bookends about rivalry. “Do not covet” really is about identity – this urge in me to identify my well-being over against yours: if I can have or be something, and you cannot have and not be something, then I will be happy. #10 says: ‘Don't do that’ – instead go back to #1 – ‘have no other gods, only the LORD God’ – why? – because God is the one rival that will lead us right. It is our human nature to look outside ourselves for our identity – that's OK, but it is easily warped; but if we can look to God, and not to others, to know who we are, then we are formed again and again in the ways of life.

Ok – so now let’s find our way home – starting our way back with Paul. In my own little rivalry with Paul, here’s where I start to find a path to resolution: it’s as Paul speaks of “being found in Christ”, of “the power of the resurrection”, of “Christ making me his own”, that I am able to hear something that is not about a perfect faith or life, not about something other-worldly, not something over against others, but instead is an ongoing identity, abiding in the life-giving Spirit of the Lord of life – in that identity, God’s Spirit renews in me a trust, a calling, a striving, that my life can be about something life-giving too.

And then that’s how I find my way back to the rivalries with which I began. Because here’s the most obvious statement of the day: it’s really hard not to get caught up in rivalries – in fact I’ve come to accept that it is impossible not to. So instead, I think it is about a certain kind of heart-set to hold in life: one that starts with commandment #10: “do not covet” - which when you think about it, has to do with not being so focused on the rightness or wrongness of my neighbor, or on the rightness or wrongness of me (I’m usually focused on my rightness 😊) but instead to go to commandment #1: “no other gods” – not the gods of rights or religion, not the gods of liberalism or elitism, not the gods of nationalism or individualism, not the gods of military or violence, not the gods of power or privilege, to define you – only the God of life to form us in who we are.

And so then what does that look like? – I think it is me listening to the Spirit around me, showing me how the God of life is at work – showing me, you could say, the right kind of rivals:

- we heard Rev. Ann Kansfield preach here last Sunday. She is someone in Room for All who shows me a way of abundance, courage, honesty, strength, joy – I receive the gifts of the Spirit through her, the gifts of life. I look to her – and see the God of life there.
- recently, I’ve been blessed to know a new friend, Zahabia, who as a Muslim in our community is a creative and profound voice for understanding and compassion. When violence erupts around us, as it did in Las Vegas, I look to one such as Zahabia who in our community often feels threatened, someone who knows the rhetoric and stereotypes of violence – and yet who lives out a commitment to community and blessing with those around her. I look to her – and see the God of life there.
- in this past week in our community, I have heard Rev. Dr. Denise Kingdom Grier speak eloquently about the voice of protest and the power of people of color to challenge injustice. She shows me a voice of justice that speaks truth to power. I look to her – and see the God of life there.

Look for such people in your life – those who show us that the Spirit of Life is at work in the world; those who point us not to the rivalries or gods of this world, but to the Spirit of the Risen Christ who does not divide but connects us to resurrection life. It’s not easy, because it seems that every week is rivalry week – as Paul says: “Not that I have already obtained this!” – but by God’s grace, you and I too, can be those in whom others see God’s Spirit of life.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.