

**“Do We Cancel Each Other Out?”**

**New London UMC**

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**Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13:8-14 NRSV**

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The Green Bay Packers and the Chicago Bears. If all the Packer fans are praying for their team to win; and all the Bears fans are praying for their team to win; that means there are more than two or three people praying for the same thing for each team. Does all this “oppositional” praying cancel each other out? And how does that square with Jesus saying, “if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (*Matt. 18:19b NRSV*)? And what if all these fans are doing that praying at church? Because Jesus goes on to say, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (*Matt. 18:20 NRSV*) It seems to me that if our football loyalty is uppermost in our minds – our bodies may be in church, but we’re not fully engaged in worshiping God. Because it’s hard to keep our minds “stayed on Jesus” if we’re replaying game footage in our heads – or, heaven forbid, on our phones!

And then there is this bitterness that bubbles up when people say that this team, or that team, is the arch rival of “our team.” Some people even say things like, “I hope we kill them today!” Or, “We’re going to stomp them into the ground!” Is that what we really want to have happen? Is that what people are praying for? And aren’t these “arch rivals” typically the teams from “neighboring” states? It seems to me that the sentiments expressed about these “neighbors” are not in line with what Paul wrote about neighbors in his letter to the Romans: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another . . . Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” (*Rom. 13:8a, 10 NRSV*) I would have to say that “love” appears to be lost whenever we delineate “neighbors” as “us” against “them.” And if you’re in a stadium with such a divided crowd, where the emotions are running higher than high on both sides, it can start to feel like an out-of-body experience as everyone gets swept up in what can be called a “mob mentality.” At that point we can lose sight of the individual people who make up “them” because we have lost hold of our own individuality. We certainly can’t “love one another” if we can’t see each person is a unique child of God. This losing hold of who we are as we become an “us” that is unable to love one another, well, it can be deeply unsettling – even if we’re not consciously aware that’s what is happening to us. It’s like we want to be swept up in the excitement of the crowd, but we have this niggling feeling that something is off – but we’re going to stuff that feeling down and ignore it. That doesn’t mean that it goes away. It only means that we don’t want to pay attention to it.

I think that is similar to the troubling undercurrent that runs through the Book of Exodus. As we’re reading Exodus we know we’re being drawn to identify with the “us” of the Israelites – to understand the oppression and pain, the harshness and struggle of everyday life. While at the same time we are being led to reject and turn against “them” – the Egyptian taskmasters and Pharaoh. But even as we take up this familiar “us” against “them” position – we have niggling feeling that something is off with what God is doing.

But we try to ignore it, and quite frankly we get distracted by all the plagues God sends! The Egyptians saw the Nile as the source of life – so the first plague turned the water of the Nile to blood – which killed the fish. But Pharaoh’s magicians can also turn water into blood. The second plague produced frogs, a symbol of fertility associated with the Egyptian goddess Hequit, to cover the land – that created a stinking mess when they died. But again, the magicians could make frogs appear, too. However, the third plague of gnats everywhere – the magicians couldn’t do that. Nor could they match the fourth plague of swarms of biting flies. Which may have brought on the fifth and sixth plagues of cattle dying and the skin of people being covered with boils. The seventh plague was a hailstorm that ruined the Egyptian fields of barley and flax – but spared the fields in Goshen, the area occupied by the Israelites. The eighth plague brought locusts that stripped the land, and crippled the Egyptian economy. The ninth plague lasted three days and brought on darkness so thick that no one could see even their hand before their face, and the Egyptian god Ra – the sun god – could not be seen. And then the tenth plague came – when God not only executed judgments against all the gods of Egypt, but God struck down every firstborn human and animal in the land of Egypt. This was the plague that would finally prove to Pharaoh and all the Egyptians that their pantheon of gods and goddesses was powerless before the God of the Israelites, and make clear to them that it was time to free the Israelites from slavery.

But it turns out that this tenth plague not only caused terror in Pharaoh and the Egyptians, it also terrifies “us” – the people of God. We’re appalled that over the course of ONE night God would take all these lives. Did God really have to be even MORE brutal than the Egyptians had been? Did God have absolutely NO LOVE or even a speck of compassion for the Egyptians? Couldn’t God have led the Israelites out of Egypt during those three days of thick darkness? Couldn’t God free these people without all this death and destruction? Taken all together, those ten plagues just seem like too much – and that tenth plague, in particular, really seems way too extreme. And that alarms us. We don’t think that’s that kind of thing God should be doing – because it’s like God is starting to act like the worst of us. We already know that people can do unspeakably horrible things. Throughout history there have been genocides, mass executions, fires set to deliberately burn people out – and yet it seems like we never hear ourselves when we say something like “they should all die” or “they should be nuked off the face of the earth.” But when God says, “I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals” suddenly we’re horrified. We don’t want God to make such a deadly statement. It’s just not right! We don’t want God to sink down to the lowest of our human standards of behavior. . . . And yet we usually act like God won’t mind if we lie, cheat, steal, etc., etc.? As if that’s the kind of behavior God wanted to see in us! Was it the kind of behavior God wanted to see in the Egyptians? Could that be why God did what God did? . . . Paul writes that now is the time for us to wake from sleep, to pay attention. Because the night is far gone, and day is near. Amen.