



What Do You Want to Be Known For?

TEXT
John 13:33–34
1 Corinthians 1:10–17

October 25, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

What do you want to be known for? Rosa Parks was known for sitting down. Neil Armstrong was known for one small step.

George Brett is known for showing just a little bit of emotion when his home run was disqualified because of pine tar. Curses Billy Martin! Dr. Bob is known for “Be of Good Cheer.”

What do you want to be known for? And what about us, we at Village? What would you want us to be known for?

For the next couple Sundays I am preaching a series: “Village Being Village.” You are generous to this church. Some of you once a year, many of you once a month and some of you every week take money from your pocket or portfolio, and you give it to this church so the ministry of this church, the mission of this church might not only continue, but continue to grow and expand.

Why do you do that? What is it about Village that is worth supporting? To know that, we might think about what Village is known for.

Jesus told his followers what he wanted them to be known for. He said, “The world will know that you follow me by your love

for one another.” That’s intriguing. He did not say the world will know that you are my followers by how you love the world. He said they will know that you are my followers by your love for one another.

What would it mean for folks in your family, and folks in our community to say, “Oh, you can tell those folks over at Village are followers of Christ — look how they treat each other.” That would be great; but it’s not easy.

One of the frequent teachings in scripture is that love, as sweet and gracious and warm as it sounds, is actually hard work. Because love, as understood in Christian faith, is not a statement about feelings. Christian love, as Clint Black sang, is something that we do. To say we love one another is a statement of how we treat one another. However, the Bible reports that time and again the followers of Jesus failed at this work.

Paul says the Corinthian church was known not for how they loved one another, but for being fractious, for squabbling. Some were boasting that they were baptized by Paul. Others boasted about being baptized by Apollos or Cephas, as if one pastor does a better baptism than another. I was baptized by

Melanie Hardison. Well, I was baptized by Rodger Nishioka ... he has a Ph.D.

It drove Paul crazy. In Chapter One he says, “I am so glad I didn’t baptize any of you, except Crispus and Gaius ... and also the house of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t even remember if I baptized anyone else.” That’s not what matters. Paul tells them that they are acting like children. Such divisions show a lack of spiritual maturity.

This is one of the places, but far from the only place, where Paul teaches that a basic trait of Christian faith, one of the things you see when people really trust their lives to the ways of Christ, is they treat one another with love. There is a sense of being in it together.

Paul talked about this all the time. That means it is really important. It also means it is really hard. Otherwise Paul wouldn’t have to talk about it.

I was baptized by Zach Walker. Oh, I wanted him, but he wasn’t liturgist that Sunday. Did you get Tom? No, thank goodness, I was baptized by Sally Wright!

Who baptized you hardly seems like a thing. We might wonder, what’s really going on here? Surely there was a bigger

issue than who baptized who! As divisions go, whether you were baptized by Apollos or Cephas or Paul hardly seems important, which may be exactly the point.

As human beings, we are a lot alike. We take care of our kids and worry about aging parents. We rake our leaves and show up for school plays or ballgames. We make plans for dinner, and we binge-watch Netflix. We want a better world, and every now and then, we all need a nap. We are a lot alike. But it seems that dividing comes very easily. It's common for us to choose teams; this is our team; we aren't them.

One of the things about choosing teams is that it's pretty common to not only want my team to win, but to want the other team to lose.

You know this. If you are a Wildcat, you not only want K-State to win, you want KU to lose. And sometimes for KU to lose, it's more sweet than a Wildcat win. (More emotion in basketball than for KU to lose a football game, I realize.)

In Ezra Klein's book *Why We Are Polarized*, he suggests that once we choose teams, we may not need there to be a reason to hate the other team. They don't have to actually do anything; we just don't like them because they are not us. Oh, we will create reasons as justifications to make it seem right to hate the other team, but real reasons are not necessary.

In Corinth, it doesn't appear they really had a reason; they just had teams. I was baptized by Apollos! I'm on team Apol-

los. Why would they even talk about that?

Because it's what we do. And that's innocent enough, until division creates the platform for hatred.

"Better place, worse place." This was the bargain that the Vietnamese interrogator at Hoa Lo prison offered to U.S. Navy Lieutenant Porter Halyburton. Halyburton was not the type to easily offer military information, so his interrogations usually resulted in a "worse place." He would be transferred to a smaller cell — then a darker cell — then one with no bed. The last "worse place" was back where he started, but this time he had to share a cell with Major Fred Cherry.

Halyburton was a white man from Davidson, North Carolina. Cherry was a descendant of Virginia slaves. It was 1965. Cherry was critically wounded, and Halyburton would have to either take care of him or let him die. Either way, the Vietnamese knew enough about racism in the States that they counted on this living arrangement being a worse place for both of them. At first it was. Conversation between them came slowly; trust even slower. But things changed.

My dad was Lieutenant Halyburton's pastor in Atlanta.

Halyburton said, "Many of the POWs had to cross racial, cultural or social boundaries to exist in such close confines." But Halyburton and Cherry did more than coexist — they rescued each other. Each man credits the other with saving his life. In that worst place, they forged a brotherhood that no enemy could shatter.¹

Here's what I bet. I bet had you been in that cell with someone you had never seen as your equal, you would have responded as they did. I see no miracle here; I see the norm.

This nation, this city is divided with almost unscalable walls erected between us. But were some natural disaster to hit us, all of that would fall away, and we would in that moment remember that we are all in this together, we are all the same family, the same team.

I wonder what it would look like to live in that place, that spiritual place, without a natural disaster.

Again, Ezra Klein suggests one reason we fail to live in that spiritual place is that we are afraid.

When we encounter someone who in our minds, for whatever reason, we deem to be not exactly like us, we are easily fearful. He says, "Fear is perhaps our most primal instinct, after all, so it's only logical that people's level of fearfulness informs their outlook on life."²

Have you listened to the campaigns? Have you listened to Fox or MSNBC? Do you listen to talk radio? Their currency is fear. They want you to be so afraid that you don't care about people on the other side. That's what they want. They want us to be so afraid of each other that we celebrate not just that we win, but that they lose.

How afraid are you? How strong does the anxiety feel in your life? Fear is a powerful drive.

And what I know is that when we are afraid, it's hard to make

the most faithful choices. We are never our best self when we are afraid. When we are afraid, it is easy to miss the humanity of the other.

If I understand the text, that's why Paul says, don't give in to petty divisions. Now petty divisions seem harmless; I was baptized by Sally Wright, but you weren't. It seems silly and it is. So why does Paul get so worked up? Because these divisions provide the place where hatred is born.

Jesus said, "The best way to let people know that I am alive in the world is to love one another. Don't let those divisions define you."

Do you get that Jesus says this is our main mission? This is what the world needs from us. The world needs us to treat one another in a way that is noticeable. It's our mission.

Just this past week, someone wrote me a note. "Tom, I've been in church all my life, but never really found church until I joined Village about four years ago. When my mother died, I kept getting calls from folks — some I didn't even know — just wanting to make sure I am okay. I wasn't okay, but the calls helped. And then I got a Stephen Minister. Talking to her is what got me through. The thing is, we are pretty different, and had we met somewhere else, I'm not sure we would have been friends; but now I count her as one of my most significant relationships."

What do you want to be known for? In a world that wants us to be afraid of one another, it wouldn't be bad for folks to say,

"Look at how those folks over at Village care for one another."

Jesus says, that's our first job.

¹James Hirsch, *Two Souls Indivisible* (2004), p. 10

²Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (2020), p. 44

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.