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2-5-2023
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

Good morning. GOOD MORNING! It is good to be with you here. I will be gone for three Sundays this month due to a short break and two weeks of intensive classes. Please keep me in your prayers as I keep you all in mine.

In today's readings I keep thinking about my childhood and a particular cousin of mine. We were nothing alike and did not get along. Whenever we were in a room together we competed in every family situation for the time, attention, and affection of our relatives. My cousin was excellent at sports, a natural athlete. I, on the other hand, am not gifted with more than rudimentary hand-eye coordination. But I was gifted with a big brain and an even bigger mouth. You can see where this is headed can't you? There are probably hundreds of movies out there that feature the jock vs. nerd rivalry. Sadly, in my childhood, there was no revenge of the nerds moment for me.

When I look at the text of Isaiah this morning, I am struck by the thought that there is a whole lot of religious performance and pride going on. The Israelites are overjoyed to return from their exile in Babylon. They are assured of their God and of their own righteousness. Now that they have returned home, they are showing off their God, their religiousness, their way of life. God has delivered us from exile, they say, surely we are God's beloved. We have been faithful to our religious practice for a long time, even in exile, surely this is why God has delivered us.

But what the Israelites returning from exile might not notice is that they have been being faithful for so long, they are really just going through the motions at this point. They are keeping a correct observance of their religious rules and regulations. Their outward appearance is perfect. They ARE the light of the world. They ARE the salt of the of the earth, and don't you dare think otherwise. They believe as the psalm proclaims that they are the generation of the righteous and will be blessed.

Going back to films, we know who these self-assured, self-congratulatory people might be. In the Karate Kid, they are the unbeaten, Cobra Kia karate dojo. In Friday Night Lights, the Israelites might be the team from Dallas. If you are from the west side of Washington state, the Israelites are WSU's Cougars. If you are from the east side, well then the Israelites might be the Huskies.

Self-confident. Self-assured. Seemingly unbeatable. The Israelites were sure of themselves, but something wasn't quite right. No matter how well they performed. No matter how much they carried out the letter of the law—think of this like practice or drills in preparation for a game. To the Israelites, no matter how hard they worked, there was still a disconnect between them and God. We are worshipping you exactly how you asked God, why aren't you listening to us? Why are we still unable to win the championship?

They looked good. They had all the right moves. But maybe their salt was losing its saltiness. Maybe their shine was starting to tarnish a little. The Israelites forgot that God is not interested in looking good, and God has never seemingly used the "right people," at least by our own ideas

about who the right people might be, to get the work done. Keeping to our sports metaphor, it seems like God always loves the underdog, the unlikely, that team of losers.

Isn't this great?! In my childhood battles with my cousin, it sounds like God might be on my side instead of theirs after all. Even if they always won, maybe God would let me show them up in the end. Like that scene in the Karate Kid where Ralph Macchio delivers that final crane kick during the tournament. And as a kid, I imagined kicking my cousin just like that on a regular basis.

But for the Israelites, things weren't going well. They were going through the motions, but not getting the benefits. They suited up, they showed up, but they went home empty. And the Loving One called up the prophet Isaiah to explain why. I don't need your fasting, God said through Isaiah. What I really need from you, God says, is your hearts.

But not the proud hearts they had within them. Not the hearts swelling with pride, with self-importance, with self-assurance and full of confidence. Not those hearts. Not our hearts with those things in them either. No, God wanted, as it says in Isaiah, a heart bent on justice for the poor, the hungry, the despised. God wanted hearts burning for economic justice for the orphan and the widow. God wanted hearts on fire to welcome the alien and the stranger. Hearts so compassionate, so loving, that when they saw someone in rags, on the winter streets holding a sign, being yelled at or verbally abused in a store that a person must act. A heart that had no choice but to respond. A heart like God's own.

Maybe in today's movie, you and I aren't the underdogs at all. Maybe you and I are really that well practiced, confident team in perfect new uniforms with a long history of winning. Maybe you and I have become so comfortable, so used to thinking about ourselves as good people, that we've lost all perspective about ourselves. Maybe you and I have been so focused on the fact that we go to church that we forget entirely about all those others on those losing teams out there in the world. That's not us we say, we win. But what does it really win us?

In sports movies, it always comes down to the coach doesn't it? A coach's ability to bring together a band of misfits and help them to become a team. A coach must help all of the individuals discover their gifts and use them to help one another lead the way to victory. At least in the movies.

Jim Tunney, the much respected NFL referee says that "Leadership is more about responsibility than ability." John Wooden, the American basketball coach who won 10 NCAA basketball championships in his 10 years with UCLA, says "It's what you learn, after you know it all, that counts." They both sound a lot like the prophet Isaiah speaking to the Israelites. It sounds a lot like Jesus speaking to us in the gospel today.

Jim Tunney, as Isaiah speaking to the Israelites, says "Sure, your religious leaders are acting right, but you have all given up your responsibility to care for others." Isaiah, in the voice of John Wooden, says to us, "You've got it all figured out, but you are still pretty dumb. Now listen to what you don't know yet."

We are a righteous people, made righteous not through any of our own work, not through our good behavior, not because of best efforts, but we are made righteous through Jesus. Through Jesus's saving work on the Cross we have been justified. We have been made righteous. We are saved and no longer have to worry about our salvation. But as Lutherans, we don't show off. We know we are called out into the world, like Isaiah is calling the Israelites, out into the world to end oppression and oppressive systems, to restore justice for all people, to care for those whom the world does not care for. All those losers, all the losing teams who don't stand a chance.

This is what Jesus means when he says in Matthew 5:20, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." It isn't about going to church. It is about getting our hands dirty in the world. Though going to church makes it possible to do all the work out there in the world. The Israelites returning from exile wanted to just keep going to church and have God take care of all the problems in the world, without their help.

We're just here to play basketball, God. To look good in these uniforms. To soak up the applause. Let me remind you and myself, this isn't why we are here at church today. This isn't all that God is calling us to. Even if our church was overflowing with people each Sunday, if we had more money for ministry than we knew how to spend, that isn't the point. That isn't the goal. The goal of having all of the people and money here each Sunday is so that we are equipped to do God's work in the world. To bring God's love to others. To help others, rather than to continue to help ourselves instead.

I hate to say it, but I have not yet had my final victory over my cousin. Even worse, they too went into ministry. They too, are loved and called by God and are doing their best to serve others. And if I think about it too long, it still drives me crazy. They weren't the villain after all. I wasn't the loser. And neither are you.

There are no villains in God's eyes. There are no losers in God's eyes either. Instead, we are all beloved children of a Loving God. We are all called to care for and to love one another, despite our differences. God demands that we do the job of loving, of caring for others in the world because you and I are God's children and because everyone else is as well. Every undocumented worker, every unhoused person at a corner with a sign, every transgender person, every family member we are currently mad at, and every coworker we have ever rolled our eyes at when their backs were turned are made in the image and likeness of God. They are made by and are loved by God.

You and I. All of us. We are called each week to gather here, to receive God's grace at the Lord's Table and then sent into the world to love and care for others. This is the point. This is how we win the game. Our uniforms are going to get dirty. We are going to have to sweat and our bodies will be sore afterward. Other people might even call us names while we are out there playing. But it is God's work, and it is worth it. And in the end, we are all on the same team, children of a loving God.

This is the good news I have heard this week and bring to you today.