

“Love and Hate, and the Super Bowl”  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden  
 Epiphany 4C (February 3, 2019)

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter, Amen.<<

The team who wins tonight’s Super Bowl may have an asterisk next to its name. That’s the verdict of opinion writer, Frank Bruni, whose op-ed on Tuesday began with these lines: “I’m not really sure why they’re bothering with a Super Bowl this year. Sure, a bunch of people will make a boatload of money, tens of millions of us will reflexively tune in and we’ll find rare common ground over how cheesy the halftime show is. But are we believers anymore? Will we really see the winner as the winner - or just as the charmed survivor of a grossly tarnished process?”<sup>1</sup> Bruni is referring to the horrid refereeing that led to tonight’s matchup between the New England Patriots and the Los Angeles Rams. The Rams are in the Super Bowl, in part, says Bruni, because they benefited from a bad call by a referee in their championship game against the New Orleans Saints. That bad call happened with less than two minutes left in the game when the Saints were threatening to score a touchdown. The Rams’ cornerback, Nickell Robey-Coleman, committed pass interference - a penalty that prevented the Saints from possibly scoring touchdown. When asked by reporters after the game whether he committed a penalty, Robey-Coleman said, “Yes. . . . I was trying to save a touchdown.”<sup>2</sup> New Orleans Saints fans have been in an uproar since the bad call. John Bel Edwards, the Governor of Louisiana, wrote a letter of protest to the commissioner of the National Football League after he’d received calls from outraged fans all over his state demanding that he do something. The New Orleans City Council called the bad refereeing an “injustice.” Senator Bill Cassidy spent time on the U.S. Senate floor criticizing the NFL, and then called for a congressional hearing to investigate. Saints season tickets holders filed lawsuits against the NFL for mental anguish, and for lost enjoyment of life, and for feeling defrauded by the bad refereeing. There are plans in New Orleans to boycott tonight’s game, which is being called the “Fake Super Bowl.” Instead of showing the real Super Bowl, Sports bars throughout the city will show on their big screen TVs the 2010 Super Bowl - that’s the Super Bowl when the Saints beat the Indianapolis Colts.<sup>3</sup>

In his op-ed, Frank Bruni likened these reactions to the current state of politics in America. As with our elections, says Bruni, some see the process of declaring a winner in tonight’s game as “tainted.” And, as with the divisions in our country, he says, the choice to view a different Super Bowl instead of tonight’s is like living in “an alternative reality.” And, he says, conspiracy theories abound among New Orleans Saints fans as they do in the American electorate. Some fans see a conspiracy at work in the bad call that left them out of tonight’s game. The referees of the Saints-Rams game when the alleged penalty occurred, were all from southern California; the Rams who benefited from the bad call, and who are playing tonight, hail from Los Angeles. Frank Bruni concludes with these words: “Professional football today ‘requires you to sit on your couch for three hours and spend the whole time

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/29/opinion/super-bowl-rams-patriots-trump.html?action=click&module=Associated&pgtype=Article&region=Footer&contentCollection=Frank%20Bruni>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKVIGdXksao>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/super-bowl/2019/01/31/super-bowl-2019-bitter-saints-fans-partys/2715143002/>

questioning if what you saw is *really* what you saw’, [leading fans] to have conflicting perceptions and wind up telling diverging stories.”<sup>4</sup>

Back in August, Joe Pierre, a Professor at UCLA, published a piece in *Psychology Today* about politics in America.<sup>5</sup> Drawing data from several studies - studies by Stanford, Texas Tech University, and a book by former NPR CEO, Ken Stern, Pierre argued that, notwithstanding a few exceptions, Americans are less divided than they seem to be. The Stanford study in 2012 focused on “affect” - how Americans *feel* about the political system - and found that how we *feel* about members of different political parties has become more negative since the 1980s. But the negative feelings aren’t based on political issues as much as they’re based on identity - if we identify with one political group, we tend to feel negative feelings toward members of other groups. Other studies have replicated those of the Stanford study, finding that issues tend to divide us less than the political teams we identify with, leading NYU professor, Kwame Anthony Appiah, to conclude that “all politics is identity politics.” The Texas Tech study focused on polarization, and found a correlation between exposure to news stories about a polarized America and feelings of polarization - the more stories people read or hear about political polarization, the more they believe there is polarization. And the book by Ken Stern, former CEO of NPR, was a story about Stern’s travels through “red” America: he attended mega-churches in the heartland, shot a hog in Texas, stood in pit row at a NASCAR race, and went to Tea-Party meetings. Stern was surprised to find that he had more in common with folks in “red” America than he thought when he began his trek. He registered as an Independent as a result.

In his letter that we call First Corinthians - a portion of which we heard a moment ago - St. Paul (a first century follower of Jesus and figurehead in many early churches) deals with various pastoral issues that have come across his desk (issues of diet and sexuality and community gifts and the role of tradition, the list goes on); but in particular, Paul addresses in this letter what he calls “schisms” or “divisions” in the church. *Schismata* in Greek, sometimes translated into English as “factions.” One of the appeals Paul makes at the beginning of this letter to Corinthian followers of Jesus is an appeal to unity: “I appeal to you,” writes Paul, “that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you” - no *schismata*, no factions. “Be united,” he goes on. Paul says that he heard by word of mouth that the Corinthians had formed opposing teams each loyal to a different leader - the Paul team, the Peter team, the Apollos team, and there were others as well - and so, from Ephesus, across the Aegean Sea, Paul writes to them pleading for unity. We get a glimpse of just how raucous the Corinthians were when we consider how small their congregation was. They met in someone’s house in the middle of the city where space was limited, leading scholars to speculate that the congregation was at most made up of 30 or 40 members, but they may have been as small as a dozen or so. Ten or twelve people fighting over team loyalty - that sounds to me like a rural New England congregational church! My guess is that Paul knew enough human beings in his life to realize that just pleading with them to break up their factions and be unified was a losing strategy. The Christianity that grew up in the centuries after Paul wrote his letters was never faction-free, and it still isn’t today - people as far apart ideologically as Lady Gaga and Mike Pence call themselves Christians. Which is why, I think, Paul doesn’t stop with a simple plea for unity in his letter to the Corinthians. He appeals to something deeper and more foundational - a foundational set of principles to

<sup>4</sup> Bruni is quoting here from Tom Ley of Deadspin.com.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201809/why-has-america-become-so-divided>

address all kinds of human divisions, whether in churches or religions or, indeed, nations like ours.

In the paragraphs leading up to the passage we heard this morning, Paul speaks of the church as a single body comprised of diverse members with diverse gifts - a body that *feels* together: "If one member suffers," writes Paul, "all suffer together ... ; if one member is honored, all rejoice together ... ." It's an appeal to unity - an appeal to unity that draws on the image of the body. Today's reading from 1 Cor 13 probes below the skin surface of the unified body, into the vessels beneath, to describe the lifeblood that circulates and flows throughout. Like blood in a body is love in a community. Then Paul describes this love that binds the body together in one of the New Testament's most beautiful passages. Paul writes that the most impressive powers of eloquence - speaking in the tongues of mortals and angels, he calls it - is just noise without love. He says that spiritual gifts and fathomless wisdom, even faith that can move mountains - it's all nothing without love. He says that generosity to the extent of giving away all of one's possessions gains nothing without love. Then Paul defines love: it is patient and kind; not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not celebrate wrongdoing but seeks truth; love bears and endures all things; it never ends. No one in the history of Greek thought prior to Paul had every described love in quite this way - some have even called this understanding of love a Christian invention. And I don't think it's a stretch to say that we could - each one of us - spend our entire lives of faith meditating on the significance of these words in our lives, seeing them as an ideal we might strive to reach; or, maybe a better image is that Paul's words could be a chisel to chip away all the jagged bits and pieces of our lives that don't love like this. Meditating on Paul's words can also be a theological act. Elsewhere in the New Testament it says that God *is* love, using the same Greek word, *agape*, that Paul uses. If God is *agape*, and if Paul describes *agape* in 1 Cor 13, then we could replace the word *agape* (the word "love") in the passage with the word "God." *God* is patient and kind; *God* not envious or boastful; *God* does not insist on God's own way; *God* is not resentful; *God* never ends.

Paul's writing on love is a tapestry that weaves together the threads of "body" and "love". Human communities - from families to churches to gatherings to organizations to nations to the whole world - human communities are bodies. And flowing through the veins of the most unified bodies is love - love that doesn't erase differences, but instead locates them on a lower rung of the ladder of importance than the rung of what unites us. Love that is patient and kind; not envious or boastful; love that does not insist on its own way; love that extinguishes hate, as today's scripture reading from First John says. Love that isn't a zero sum game, but that treats the celebration of one person as the celebration of all; love that treats the suffering of one person as the suffering of all. Celebration with whichever team wins tonight - celebration of the speed and strength of the human body, celebration of teamwork and hard work. We celebrate together and we suffer together - feeling with actor Jussie Smollett, who was attacked in Chicago on Tuesday for being both gay and African American, and for representing both on the show *Empire*.<sup>6</sup> Our celebrations and our sufferings together "in the name of love," to borrow a line from the band U2 - our celebrations and sufferings as a body with love in our veins, won't erase our differences, but will reframe them, so that the sinews and the muscles that draw us together become stronger than the fractures of hate which divide. We might say that the entire journey of faith - regardless of religious tradition - could be nothing more than a meditation on love.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/29/arts/television/empire-jussie-smollett-attacked.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

Let me close this morning with words from the Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, the President of our denomination. He wrote a letter on Monday about hate and love. “The vision of a body united - in purpose, in mission, in vision,” he writes, “is one that inspired the birth of our denomination [the United Church of Christ]. ... Throughout our shared history as a people of faith ... we have challenged ourselves to widen the circle of inclusion. Widening the circle has always come with growth pains as we shed old skins and welcome those whom we had previously thought unwelcome. And, with each new articulation of a more fully expressed Body of Christ we have realized new joy. Through it all we remain focused on the call to be one and committed to meeting the challenges inherent in that call.

We are now living in and through a season when the threats to unity are legion,” he writes. “Talk of walls that mark refugees as threats, labels like ‘terrorist’ that attach too easily to Muslims, overt racial bias that normalizes fear and hatred, a pandemic of abuse to women with the trigger reflex to forgive the men who author that abuse have turned America into a land many of us no longer recognize, and that too many of us are finding harder and harder to reconcile with our faith.

Now more than ever, [the spirit of God] is seeking to partner with anyone committed to unifying the human community. The gospel mandate to love our neighbor as we love ourselves resonates deep within us. It calls for the better angels among and within us to always resist impulses to hate, to condemn, to vilify, or to castigate. In such a time as this, the United Church of Christ’s call to fulfill the prayer of Jesus, that they may all be one, stands as an urgent mandate to [all of us] who envision a just world for all.” Amen.