

Taking a Knee
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Matthew 5:23-24 NRSV

23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

1 Thess 5:23-26 NRSV

23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

25 Beloved, pray for us.

26 Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.

Over the last three weeks we have been learning about how the early Christian church held patience as the highest virtue – the “virtue we share with God” – and how the church sought to embody patience by training its members to follow the example and the teachings of Jesus... especially his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Because of persecution, speaking openly about Christ was rare and worship services were closed to outsiders until they complete catechism. The church grew by leaps and bounds in the first three centuries not because of what the Greco-Roman world *heard* from Christians, but from what they *saw*.

This morning I want to tell you about what they saw, and since today is Superbowl Sunday, this story is especially appropriate.

The story comes from a written account of events that took place in Carthage, the leading Roman city North Africa. The year is 203 CE, the setting was the amphitheater, and the occasion is a day of games and spectacles sponsored by governor of the city in honor of Emperor’s son’s birthday. For the citizens of Carthage, this would have been like Super Bowl Sunday – an event marked by lots of eating and drinking, a healthy dose of national pride, and of course lots of spectacle. We have flyovers, fireworks, and the halftime show. They had wild animals, gladiators fighting to the death, and of course criminals being executed for sport.

For these games, the criminals were a group of young Christians. Their crime was refusing to do their patriotic duty by making prayers and sacrifices to the gods, including Caesar. When things went poorly, Christians were blamed for not doing their part. These games – including the execution of condemned prisoners – was nothing out of the ordinary. It was all part of the tradition and, in that sense, very predictable. Yet, how the Christians bore witness to their love for their Lord and for one another caught everyone by surprise. That appears to be the reason the events were set down in writing and preserved as part of an account called *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*.

To understand why the crowds were so taken aback by what they saw the Christians do, we need some context about what the culture was like and what life among the Christians was like. Roman life and culture was organized *vertically*, from the top down. At the top was the emperor, then the aristocratic elite, and so forth down to the very poor and the slave. The seating in the amphitheater was organized the exact same way. The prominent members of society were up at the top and the further down the social ladder you were, the closer you were to bottom. Everyone knew their place, and everything about Roman life reinforced this.

Christians were different, and startlingly so. Christians organized their life together *horizontally*. The low born and the high born treated each as equals. Unlike most Roman associations, women were encouraged to participate and even lead. Children were included, along with the elderly. The desperately poor were welcomed and treated with dignity. Christians called one another sister and brother. Even though they had nothing in common – certainly not blood – Christians treated one another like family.

When they gathered for worship, the Christians were always mindful of Jesus' words:

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For them, love of God and love of neighbor were inextricably linked. A church in conflict could not expect God to accept their worship. So after the sermon and before the eucharistic meal, Christians were called upon to exchange the kiss of peace. This was one of the most distinctive practices among Christians because it was the time when they would go to one another, resolve any grievances, and make sure they were in right relationship before taking part in the meal.

In Greco-Roman society, kissing was important but rarely talked about. It was usually restricted to family members. People of different social stations would never kiss one another. And yet the Apostle Paul reminds his churches of its importance in four of his letters. This kiss was intended to be intimate and heartfelt while also being chaste. It the kiss exchanged by those who were committed to treating one another as family and never allowing animosity to come between them or between them and God.

To the pagan world around them, this practice was scandalous. It was creepy. But for some, it was intriguing and even inspiring.

Perpetua was twenty-one and from the upper class. Felicitas was a slave. Three other members of their small Christian community had also been arrested. Saturus, the catechist who had been preparing them all for baptism, joined them in their captivity. The five were baptized while in prison in the weeks leading up to the games. While there...

... crowds of outsiders interact[ed] with the Christians. When [the proconsul] Hilarianus sentenced the prisoners, a huge crowd gathered in the forum to watch. [T]he night

before the games... as the Christians celebrated their *libera*, their last meal, the populous looked on. The Christians, for whom this was an *agapē* meal of worship and fellowship, looked up, saw the outsiders, and addressed them—expressing their joy in suffering, warning them of God’s judgment, and inviting them the next day to recognize them in the amphitheater. The outsiders apparently found the emotional tugs of this occasion to be bewildering, and—the *Passion* reports—“many of them came to believe (Kreider, 47-48).”

The next day, as the finale to the games, the Christians marched into the amphitheater. “It is likely that they decided to defy conventional stereotypes by behaving confidently, without cringing—they would march into the arena purposefully and joyously (Kreider, 46).” When they arrived, the games choreographers directed them to put on costumes. They wanted the men to dress as priests of Saturn and the women to dress as priestesses to Ceres. They refused, and Perpetua spoke for the group: “Now we came here of our own will, so our freedom might not be constrained.” Later, when Perpetua and Felicitas were both stunned after being tossed by the cow (the female animal that had been provoked to kill them, as women), Perpetua woke up, went to Felicitas, raised her up, and the two stood side by side (Kreider, 47).

The city had gathered to see desperate criminals begging for their lives. They expected to see the condemned overcome with fear, each one fending for himself or herself. But instead, after being mauled by animals, with the gladiators approaching to deal the final death blows, the Christians gathered in the center of the amphitheater. Together – men and women, slave and free, advantaged and disadvantaged – they “kissed each other so that they might bring their martyrdom to completion with the kiss of peace.” (58)

These young men and women died the way they had learned to live: In perfect love and freedom. How did the onlookers respond? No doubt many saw the whole display as disgusting and offensive. But according to the account, at least a few were so jarred out of their former ways of thinking and feeling that it changed them forever. At least one person – Pudens, a soldier who had been guarding them throughout their imprisonment – managed to get to them in the minutes before they were executed. Saturus said to him, “Remember me, and remember the faith.” He then asked Pudens for his ring, dipped it in his own blood, and gave it back as a tangible expression of the faith they had begun to share (Kreider 49). Some weeks later Pudens too became a Christian.

This afternoon, most of us are going to watch the game. Those of us who have watched a lot of football know that some players and coaches will gather in the center of the field before the game. As a sign of their faith, they will take a knee in prayer. When the National Anthem is performed, some will take a knee in protest. If – heaven forbid – a player gets seriously injured during the game, then players may again take a knee. When you see that happen today, think about Perpetua, Felicitas, and their friends exchanging a kiss of peace in the middle of a bloody arena and ask yourself: What has changed and what hasn’t?

Amen.