

“First Place in Everything”

“He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”

The musical *Damn Yankees* tells the story of Joe Boyd, a long-suffering fan of the Washington Senators, a team that had a long history of losing, especially to the New York Yankees (the team is now known as the Texas Rangers and has still never won a World Series). One night, Boyd vows that he would sell his soul for a long-ball hitter to defeat the team he so detests. Suddenly, “Applegate” appears; he looks like a slick salesman, but he really is the Devil who offers Boyd a deal: if he gives up his soul, he will become Joe Hardy, the young slugger the Senators need. In this Faustian bargain, Joe Boyd is given an opportunity to help his beloved Senators accomplish his long-cherished desire to finally finish the season in first place, ahead of those “damn Yankees.”

While this musical is of course a fictional tale, its setting is rooted in reality. The Washington Senators were perennial also-rans to the dynasty that was the New York Yankees, who over the course of their history have won 40 American League pennants and 27 World Series championships. When *Damn Yankees* premiered in 1955, the Yankee dynasty had recently won five consecutive World Series titles and would win again in 1956 (when Don Larson pitched the only perfect game in World Series history). The Yankees were – and are – a team that you either love or hate; either you’re a devoted fan (like me) or you detest this team that always finished in first place and considered finishing on top to be its birthright. While the musical may be fictional, its title has been uttered by fans of opposing teams for generations.

While I would like the Yankees to finish in first place every year, I must admit that this is neither possible nor desirable. As fans of the Blue Jays and other American League East teams will attest, the Yankees didn’t even make the playoffs this year; while it was disappointing, I took solace in the fact that they are in a rebuilding process and have great prospects for good seasons to come. I was also pleased that a team who fans had suffered like those of the Senators – the Chicago Cubs – finally won a World Series championship after 108 years of frustration. While the goal of the Yankees – and for that matter all teams – is to finish the season in first place, the reality in all sports is that “you can’t win ‘em all.”

Even if you don’t follow any particular team – winning or losing – experience teaches us that we can’t always come out on top, that it’s impossible to be in first place in everything. Some of our most valuable lessons, in fact, come from losing or failing in an endeavor; *“understanding how to maintain your success and move past your failures can help you lead a more productive and fulfilling career.”* (Brian Honigman). Learning humility in winning and graciousness in losing helps build character and allows us to share such experiences with other, even if not finishing in first place can be disappointing. While first place may be our goal, we also must recognize that our limitations will prevent us from winning all the time.

But this reality of not being able to be in first place all the time appears to be contradicted in today’s second lesson from Paul’s letter to the Colossians. The letter was written to the Christians in Colossae, a city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) that is being threatened by teachings that are contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Of particular concern for Paul is the practice of “syncretism,” which is the mixing of religious traditions that was common at the time. Colossians opposes such practices because they distribute the powers on which human beings depend among a variety of sources.

- “Against any such division of loyalty, the letter presents a strong and poetic image of the sole lordship of Christ, both throughout the whole cosmos and in the church. Christ is the unified and unifying power on which alone they can depend. There is no stronger affirmation of the lordship of Christ in the New Testament.” – *Oxford Annotated Bible*.

Following the typical New Testament letter format, Paul begins Colossians with a thanksgiving, “*for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.*” (1:4-5). As Paul thanks God for the faithfulness of the Christians in Colossae, he also prays that God will give them the power they will require to enable them to live lives that are fully pleasing to God: “*May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.*” (1:11-12). Nothing less than God’s “glorious power” at work within them will be necessary to live worthily of the Lord. The power is not for its own sake or for displays of wonder working; it is for all endurance and patience: “*The ability to face trials, distractions, and opposition in faithfulness requires more than survivor instinct or stoic fortitude; divine resources are needed.*” (Andrew Lincoln). The life worthy of the Lord will be marked by thankfulness and joy. It is in this context that God has already enabled believers to share in the present “the inheritance of the saints in the light.”

Paul also offers thanks that God has delivered believers from the “power of darkness” and has transferred them to a new sphere of rule: “the kingdom of his beloved Son.” It is through their relationship to God’s son that believers experience redemption. The “forgiveness of sins” is the restored relationship with God in which they are freed from guilt and their offences against God are no longer held against them. As Martin Luther teaches in the *Small Catechism*,

- “He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.”

In order to further illustrate this point, Paul turns to an original hymn that declares that Christ is the one who supremely makes the invisible God visible: “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.*” (1:15-16). The creation of all things was for Christ and to enhance his glory; for “*he was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*” (John 1:2-3). The one who, because of his preexistence, helped to bring all things into being is also the one who continues to sustain the whole creation and prevent its disintegration into chaos; for “*he himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*” (1:17).

As Christ is the one who “*rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love*” (“Joy to the World,” ELW Hymn 267), the praise of Christ’s supremacy over the church as his body matches the praise of his supremacy over the realm of creation. Christ Jesus is the “*head of the body, the church*” (1:18). “Head” (*kephale*) denotes Christ’s rule or authority over the church as his “body” (*soma*). Christ’s resurrection as the “*firstborn from the dead*” makes him the firstborn among many brothers and sisters (“*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.*” – Romans 8:29). Because of his unique relationship to God and his unique role in God’s work of reconciliation, Christ is the one who rightfully has “*first place in everything.*”

Such a claim to preeminence is not unique to Paul or this letter. From the very beginning, God's people have been called to place all of their trust and devotion to God alone while at the same time rejecting any allegiance to any other gods. The First Commandment instructs God's people that *"you shall have no other gods before me ... for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments."* (Exodus 20:3, 5-6). In the *Large Catechism*, Luther offers a definition of a "god" that helps us understand why both this commandment and Paul's declaration that Christ must have "first place in everything" are so vital for us as God's people:

- "A 'god' is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God."

In his temptation in the wilderness, Jesus resists the devil's offer of *"all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor"* by quoting Deuteronomy 6:13: *"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."* (Matthew 4:8-10). Jesus resists temptation in order that he might *"save us from the time of trial,"* all that might tempt us to turn away from the true God and place something or someone other than Christ Jesus in first place. We are called to worship and serve God alone – not because God is "jealous" in the sense that God is envious in a human sense, but because only God is the source of true light and true life. The proclamation of the Church from its earliest days has been that *"there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12).

- "If the gospel promise is true, *Jesus* must be the speaker, for what the gospel promises is Jesus himself as the fulfilling partner of our End; and only he can thus legitimately promise his own life and work. Therefore, if the gospel promise is true, Jesus is present to us in and by it." – Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism*.

To say that *"in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell"* (1:19) means that there is nothing outside the scope of Christ's promise and power, because Christ now sums up all that God is in interaction with God's creation and God's people. As Christ is the means and goal of creation, so also he is the means and goal of reconciliation; it is through Christ that *"God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross."* (1:20). Christ must have "first place in everything" so that this central work of reconciliation might be accomplished so that all that once divided us from God and from one another might no longer exist:

- "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it." – Ephesians 2:13-16.

We are not called to give Christ "first place in everything" so that he might dominate us in the manner in which champions often lord their victories over their opponents; we place Christ in first place in our lives because he is the only one who can redeem us and reconcile us. The words that we sing as we are about to hear the Gospel – *"Alleluia! Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."* – are Peter's response to the decision of others to turn their backs on Jesus and place other gods in first place. We put Christ in first

place because like the Apostle we too *"have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."* (John 6:69).

We continue to put Christ in first place in our lives every time we share our common confession that *"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,"* when we begin and end our worship services *"in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"* and when we pray in the words given to us by Jesus that *"thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* In this petition of the Lord's Prayer, we declare that Christ is the king to whom we bear true allegiance, knowing that Christ the King is the only one who *"breaks and hinders every evil scheme and will – as are present in the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh – that would not allow us to hallow God's name and would prevent the coming of his kingdom,"* and he is the only one who *"strengthens us and keeps us steadfast in his word and in faith until the end of our lives."* (Small Catechism). Because Christ the King alone has accomplished all of this through his death and resurrection, he is the only one who has a rightful claim to "first place in everything": *"For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true."*

As we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism this morning, all of us commit ourselves anew to putting Jesus Christ in first place in everything – in our own lives as well as in the life of the church. We believe that *"in baptism our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ,"* the peace that is ours as we are reconciled through *"the blood of his cross."* It is through Holy Baptism that we are *"reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ,"* the body that bears true allegiance to Jesus as its head and worships and serves our Lord alone. As rejoice in the gift of new life that this child receives this morning, we also affirm our baptismal promises in proclaiming our belief in God who is revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; at the same time, we renounce any and all loyalties or allegiances to any other gods or anything that would draw us away from God:

- *"Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?"*
- *"Do you renounce the powers of this world that draw you from God?"*
- *"Do you renounce the ways of sins that draw you from God?"*

Our common answer is clear: *"I renounce them!"* There is only room for one who has first place in everything: the one who is our Good Shepherd, the one who is the Word of eternal life, the one who gave of himself so that we might die to sin and rise to newness of life, the one who is the true King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

- *"Though hordes of devils fill the land, all threatening to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us. Let this world's tyrant rage; in battle we'll engage! His might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail! One little word subdues him." – "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," Martin Luther.*

All teams – even those "Damn Yankees" – always want to be in first place; but first place is not where any team or any person will always find themselves. But for the church that bears the name of Christ, there is no question as to who is in first place in all aspects of our lives – in our worship, in our prayers, in our mission, and in our discernment. Christ is Lord alone; Jesus is our true King; the one who fulfills God's promises and redeems us from the power of evil is the only one who deserves to be in first place – now and forever. Amen.