

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Proper 12 -- Year C
July 23-24, 2022
Genesis 18:20-32; Colossians 2:6-15
St. Luke 11:1-13

We are not getting much news out of Afghanistan these days, but what little news we are getting is far from encouraging. Extreme strictures on the rise of women are quickly being reimposed. The education of children (mostly male children now) is largely religious indoctrination. Those who assisted the Western pro-democracy efforts are suffering reprisals, some at the cost of their lives. And, whatever assurances the Taliban had given regarding humane treatment have largely been forgotten. These are folks who are so certain they are in the right that they have no problem imposing their ideas of right and wrong on everybody else. These are folks who brook no opposition. These are folks who "play for keeps" and will happily dispose of anyone who stands in their way.

But, in that, they are far from unique. Much the same could be said for the folks who governed Colossae, who likewise brooked no opposition and "played for keeps." Now, sadly, because Colossae has never been excavated, we know less about the city than we know about many other cities that fell under Roman rule. But, we do know that Colossae was located in a region in south central Asia Minor where revolts against Roman rule were not uncommon. The people of the surrounding region of Phrygia were a proudly independent people, who didn't take kindly to being told how to live their lives or to govern their affairs.

And, yet, not unlike the Taliban, the Romans brooked no opposition and had their own ways of letting everyone know that they were in charge. Which is to say, they "played for keeps." So, I suspect the members of Paul's little church in Colossae were more than familiar -- maybe even personally familiar -- with how the Romans dealt with anyone who stood in

their way. Once a new nation was conquered or once a revolt was crushed, the Romans would take the generals of the conquered nation or the leaders of the failed revolt, would strip them naked, deprive them of their weapons, scourge them, and take all of their insignia and battle flags and nail them to a T-shaped cross. On that cross, they would then post a placard in large enough letters for everyone to see a list of charges, an indictment, against those who had dared to oppose Rome. They would then take their captives, line them up behind that T-shaped cross, and parade them stark naked through the streets. They "made a public spectacle of them." At the tail end of the parade would come the leader, the general, the king, who would be publicly and summarily executed. The Romans brooked no opposition and "played for keeps."

This is exactly the experience, the image, the picture which Paul taps into in the closing verses of today's Second Lesson from Colossians, ...no doubt, because Paul is aware, perhaps far more than we are aware, that the enemies of the Christian Faith brook no opposition and are "playing for keeps."

They're "playing for keeps" with the lives of our children, dangling in front of them an unimaginable array of gimmicks and gadgets, persuading them that the sum and substance of life is to be found in being amused and entertained and stimulated on a 'round-the-clock basis. They're "playing for keeps" with the lives of our young adults, quietly convincing them that the real measure of their worth is to be found in the size of their house or the length of their resumé or the nameplate on their office door. They're "playing for keeps" with the peace-of-mind of so many impressionable minds, insisting that the standards that helped create stable marriages and families for generations no longer apply. They're "playing for keeps" with the lives of all of us, using every intellectual trick imaginable to suggest that the Christian Faith and the

truth of the Scripture cannot withstand critical scrutiny and that "real living" is to be found in a host of live-for-the-moment ideologies or philosophies or metaphysical experiences.

But, one of the reasons that today's Second Lesson, especially those closing verses, is one of my favorite passages in Scripture is that Paul makes clear that -- at Calvary -- God too was "playing for keeps,"...and, not only "playing for keeps," but winning "for keeps." Paul's vivid imagery insists that what the Romans did to their opponents, God has done to his enemies, sin and death, the principalities and powers that attempt to undermine God's loving purposes for His human family. Paul's vivid imagery declares that what happened at the Cross of Calvary was not just some footnote or sidebar to history but the focal point, "Ground Zero," in God's great struggle for the hearts and minds and souls of the people God so urgently loves. Paul's vivid imagery declares that what happened at that Garden Tomb on Easter morning was no historical curiosity but God's great declaration of victory in the battle between falsehood and truth, between sin and grace, between hatred and love, between death and life. Paul's vivid imagery depicts God Himself stripping bare, exposing the lies and hypocrisy of those who oppose Him and humiliating the principalities and powers and elemental spirits of the universe and the rulers of this present darkness and all of the empty "philosophers," exposing them as the deceivers they are and nailing their empty promises to the cross. Good Friday and Easter declare God's ultimate victory -- and declare that God won't give up on you without a fight, even a fight to the death.

No, the reports (or lack of reports) out of Afghanistan simply re-inforce what history has taught us throughout the generations. There is no shortage of those who will use every tool at their disposal to oppose God's loving and gracious purposes and to impose their ideas on everyone else.

These are folks who brook no opposition, who "play for keeps," and who will happily dispose of anyone who stands in their way.

But, Paul wants his friends in Colossae -- and us -- to realize (and to trust) that as much as those folks like to think they're in control, God "plays for keeps" and God gets the final word. So that at the Cross, God "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them" by means of the Cross. Amen