



Football Friday nights will, yet again, become the standard for many places throughout this state and beyond. There's almost this soothing romanticism about it: that gathering on metal bleachers amidst crisp fall air to cheer for one team has this unifying force to it all that's seemingly rather hard to find nowadays. So it was for us in northwest Ohio during my high school years. We didn't have quite the caliber of football prominence, to say the least, but people still showed up on those often cold and rigid metal bleachers for pride and unity or who knows what. But for myself and my closest friends, it was more so about the marching band.

And after we and the opposition performed our respective halftime shows on the field, both bands would gather behind the north end zone to exchange pleasantries and affirmations for a job well done: to perhaps show some sense of unity of music appreciation camaraderie or something. But the truth is, we teenagers didn't care about that. Even those of us who weren't scoring touchdowns, but were playing percussion and woodwind and brass instruments, we weren't so interested in unity. We wanted to win. We wanted to put on a better show than the other drummers and trumpet and clarinet players. It wasn't about unity of music or sports. That wasn't so much fun, in the end, but winning was...every Friday night.

After all that was said and done, the small group of us would head off to my parents' house to do absolutely nothing constructive at all, descending into the nonsense of video and poker games through all hours of the night, when it was just as fun to win, to say the least. Now, it's safe to say organized religion was not exactly at the forefront of our minds with our post-game festivities, but regardless, the majority of us were of the Protestant sort: mostly Lutherans with a Methodist and a United Church of Christ thrown in there for good measure. However, there was the one lone resident Catholic named "Patrick," who received more than his fair share of jokes and criticisms and direct lines of questioning as we adolescents were prone to do, because again, unity was not all that fun, but winning was, as if we even knew the full scale of what a little faith could do in a world beyond our Football Friday night corner of it all.

As the years went by, and we ventured on our separate ways of collegiate learning or job callings, one of the most significant events during that time was Hurricane Katrina: a most horrifying act of nature that killed over a thousand people, and hundreds of thousands losing their homes. The Protestants of our group might have sent up some prayers and maybe passed on a bit of financial support: all well and good, but "Patrick" couldn't help himself, and went down to Louisiana to be on the front lines of the relief efforts. Because the only hope the survivors had in the aftermath of the most immense tragedy were those who were willing to unify in love and compassion and a death-defying Resurrection joy. The only way the survivors could win with such pain and sorrow was if others were willing to unify to serve those in need.

That most humbling experience instilled a tremendous impact on "Patrick," further leading him into job callings of service, one of which was with a place called Flying Horse Farms, a medical specialty camp just north of Columbus, where young people regardless of physical or emotional or mental ability are able to enjoy an actual camp experience of games, campfires, and more. "Patrick" would work alongside others of different political and religious affiliations, and yes, even football Friday and Saturday and Sunday night allegiances, because the unity of love and compassion and a death-defying Resurrection joy for those young people,

including those diagnosed with terminal illnesses; the unity for them, was how they could still more than manage to win in this life.

Not that there's anything wrong with a little friendly level of competition on Football Friday nights amongst the teams or marching bands. There's nothing wrong with a little friendly level drive to win, but the unity as described in the Ephesians reading, a unity in the faith built on boundless love, on the most heart-felt compassion, on the truly death-defying Resurrection; a unity that God brought to life in Jesus Christ for Gentiles and Jews and Samaritans and Galileans and reaching all over the world: that unity of God's care for us is how humanity wins. And it's not waiting for us at the end of a mortal game clock. It's already been unleashed on this field filled with divisions galore, to be sure.

We may think Football Friday nights might be one of the best places to experience a precious glimpse of a soothing romanticism of entire towns coming together for a few hours, at least. But God has something far, far better: something that can be experienced not just on the good days or the Sundays, but even when travesty hits, or when a child is told that uncertainty looms over their life: God's unity in Christ will always triumph; a unity of love and compassion and death-defying Resurrection joy that has marched down from the evidently not-so-distant bleachers of heaven into our hearts and will never ever leave. For that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!