



## Take A Knee

*As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.*

*1 Corinthians 12:20-26 NRSV*

*"You can't continue to slap people in the face and not expect them to stand up,"* says Vicqari Horton, a junior tight end at Aurora Central High School in Aurora, Colorado. Stand up is the direct opposite of what Mr. Horton did that landed him an opportunity to be quoted by the New York Times.<sup>1</sup> Vicqari and approximately 30 of his 44 teammates knelt during the playing of the Star Spangled Banner on a weekend game in October of last year. In the bleachers, some parents either clenched their teeth or their fists in outrage or in an outpouring of support.

Today, all across the country as well as across every sporting league and conference, players are "taking a knee" during the pre-game playing of the National Anthem of the United

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/04/us/national-anthem-protests-high-schools.html>



States of America. From National Football League to the Pee Wee Football League and to the Women’s Basketball League, players are protesting with their bodies – more specifically with their knees. They are inspired by San Francisco 49ers ex-quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, who initially sat down during the playing of the National Anthem during two pre-season games in protest to racial injustice. After a conversation with a colleague and former Army Green Beret, Kaepernick’s protest has changed form from sitting to the act of taking a knee instead during the playing of the National Anthem. Both forms of protest landed Kaepernick the moniker of the most hated football player in the league and “former NFL quarterback.”

For me, this begs several questions, but the most important for our purposes today is this: Who is to say whether taking a knee during the singing of the national anthem—not to diminish the purpose of it—is an act of disrespect to the fallen in war and to the flag of a nation whose anthem claims are “*for the land of the free and the home of the brave?*”

How you feel about Colin Kaepernick’s protest, and the others who have joined him—their right to do so, and the nature and quality of their respect—does not matter. However, the way you understand your position in the body of Christ does.



## RECONCILIATION MINISTRY

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Like it or not, as members of the Christian community—the body of believers in Christ—we are a counter-cultural movement community. Our scripture today reminds us of our unity in the one Spirit from which we all drink. In the text, in verse 13, it reads, *“For we were all baptized by the one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jew or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were given the one Spirit to drink.”*

Because we are many members in the one body, I cannot in good Christian conscious make you “other”, then watch you as one part of the body suffer, and assume it is of no consequence to me as a member of the same body. That is why our text goes further to proclaim that the eye cannot say to the hand ‘I have no need of you,’ nor the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, it says, counter to today’s culture, we have to give special *honor* and *recognize as indispensable* to the body the members that seem to be weaker. Colin Kaepernick says it this way, *“I’m going to speak the truth when I’m asked about it. This isn’t for publicity or anything like that. This is for people who don’t have the voice. And this is for people that are being oppressed and need to have the equal opportunities, to be successful, to provide for their families and not live in poor circumstances.”*



This is one expression of unity in a culture of disunity, disrespect, and disregard for humanity. We need to remember our call to unity. Not uniformity, but unity in the body. When one part suffers, all should suffer with it and when one part rejoices all should rejoice with it. This is hard work. To move counter to the norm is to subject yourself to unpopularity, to sacrifice comfort and to risk seeing yourself in those who are disrespected, disregarded and dehumanized.

Author and theologian Curtiss DeYoung in his co-authored book with Allan Boesak “Radical Reconciliation,” reminds the reader that the first-century congregations were founded and led by the oppressed minority in the Greco-Roman empire. He describes these early congregations as healing stations for oppressed Jews who were followers of the crucified Christ. They became what he called “healing laboratories” for the oppressed and colonized Jewish Christians who in turn invited the privileged and the powerful Romans and Greeks into the faith community without compromise.

Understanding *reconciliation* through the lens of a crucified and dehumanized savior and Lord in Jesus Christ, re-humanizes the body of believers and helps them to regain their identity in



Christ as fully human - made in the image of God. Wow! That is the process of reconciliation.

When we take the risk to see ourselves in the eye of the oppressed savior for whom we find our faith and our being, it helps us to understand the power and privilege that we have to extend in exchange for the same who do not.

So to be reconciled is not zero-sum politics or theology. This kind of reconciliation is right aligning not a win/lose. As DeYoung writes, it is a process of defecting from our own entitlements and loyalties in order to ourselves be liberated. We do this in an effort to liberate the oppressor, and ultimately, to set those who are captive to the oppressive empire free. This is not a one-time deal, folks! Daily, our eyes have to be opened to see that which we have consciously or unconsciously opted to not see.

For example, during one of my pastoral visits, (this time last year in Tulsa, Oklahoma), when I arrived, I asked my Uber driver if things in the city had calmed down. He asked from what? To which, I knowingly moving into risky territory answered, 'You know, the Terence Krutcher protests. "Oh, that was just an isolated incident." Then, he went on to describe the onslaught of earthquakes as a conspiracy theory that he believed is an impact of policies intended to protect the rich. I agreed, that too was a



justice issue, but I was deeply saddened to realize the large chasm of reality between White America and Black America.

The killing of Black men and women that is being televised and through social media is an affirmation of macro and micro-aggressions African Americans wake to every day. If white America see's our pain as an isolated incident that pain exacerbated as trivializing our humanity. It's time for the Church to return to being the social conscious of our communities and nation, and it is time for us to take a knee.

As an armchair theologian and quarterback, I offer these salient observations from the act of taking a knee during a football game that may have some import for our time together. As you may observe from my stature I have not been recruited nor paid to play on anybody's football team with the exception of Willie Horton's team on Sundays because all the boys in the neighborhood were stuck in church with their families. I was already home because my family was Catholic! So, for credibility sake, I caught a few footballs in my arms and on few games on television.

There are three opportunities for taking a knee in football from my viewpoint that continue to catch my wonder and enjoyment in the most strategic sport I know.



The first is the punt return or the kickoff when the ball punted or kicked off by the opposing team after a touchdown or a failed attempt to advance at least 10 yards in four successive tries. The receiver of the punt is a member of what is called special teams and is sometimes called a return specialist. These players also function as the team's wide receiver and/or running back. It is said that returning a punt is more difficult than receiving a throw from the quarterback because you have to judge the ball that is not really intended for you to catch or return successfully. This special teams receiver must determine when to signal for a fair catch, or catch and run with the ball from the point of reception.

The receiver can take a knee here to signal, with his arm above his helmet while the ball is in flight. It signals the opposing team, I'm good. I'm not going to run it and risk tackle and that this is a good starting point for our offense without there being any contact. It can be seen as a protection move. Unfortunately, we in the church opt for the fair catch strategy in a game where lives are depending on our advocacy and willingness to run the ball.

On the other hand, the specialty team receiver can take a knee in the end zone. This is the easiest to understand. When the receiver takes a knee in the end zone, this play is called a touchback and gives the team a starting point of the 20-yard line.



The player makes the judgment again while the ball is in flight determining if he can run more than 20 yards from the end zone or risk starting closer to the opposing team's goal if his run is stopped by the defense. I like the touchback because I see parallels in the fight for racial justice.

What would it look like if we gave members of our society and culture who have been code-named 'underprivileged' or 'under-served', 'inner-city' and gave them a 20-yard leg up? What if we pressured our elected officials to reconsider redistricting schools so that 20 percent more of our human and financial resources went to underperforming schools to right align them with our stated learning objectives? What if we halted 'teaching to the test' which is culturally irrelevant to students who live in communities where there are no teachers, lawyers, doctors nor grocery stores? If I go home to a food desert, can I really solve a world problem, about how much change I will have when I go grocery shopping for a week with \$170.00 for a family of four?

Lastly, a coach will often ask a player to take a knee as a form of discipline when a player has fouled up his or her instructions and is in need of a behavioral adjustment. Well, team, as the scriptures remind us in Romans, "the whole earth is moaning for the revealing of the children of God."





Can't you feel it? Can't you see it? The ground is actually shaking under our feet.

The revolution is now being televised, and we need to take a knee, too so that we might be led by our coach, the Holy Spirit. What if we took a collective congregation, community or church-wide knee to listen to what the blood of our sisters and brothers from the ground is calling us to do? Yes! It is hard to simply sit by and wait for the Spirit. For those of us who are accustomed to power and influence, it is even harder for us not to control the narrative.

What could happen though, if we prayed and fasted, and if we listened to the testimonies of the Mothers of the Movement – the mothers of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Terrence Crutcher, who describe both their nightmare and their redemption? Can we take time to privilege the voices of the voiceless in the movement, instead of making those voices say what we want them to say? That is what it means not to control the narrative.

Before I leave, let us ponder upon another model from American football of taking a knee, the quarterback kneeling. This occurs usually at the end of the game, but often during the game when after the snap of the ball the quarterback immediately takes a knee indicating the end of the play. It is used to let the clock run



# RECONCILIATION MINISTRY

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down to end the game and usually for the humiliation of the losing opposing team. But it really is used to protect or preserve a win and lessen the risk of a fumble.

Is the deeper question the ire against the gall to protest or is it the subject of the protest? Do Black Lives Matter? Or, do we, with our silence and vitriol, affirm indeed that the eye can say to the hand, I have no need of you!

As the Apostle Paul, I too believe that whereas indeed there are many members, we are all part of one body. As your Minister of Reconciliation, I believe that we can all be reconciled and be the one body of Christ.

Taking a knee is an act of protest, but taking a knee also is an act of acknowledging that there are some members of our body that have been mistreated and disrespected. Taking a knee is a Christian act. Will you recognize yourself as part of the body? Will you take a knee with me and pray for the whole body of believers?