

The Sixth Sunday of Easter [Confirmation Sunday] • May 1, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

John 16:23-33

“Civil War”

When it comes down to it, would you take a stand for your beliefs? Would you choose a side that meant you'd lose a friend, a position of authority, or something else to which you've become accustomed? And if you did, why would you do it?

Some of those questions are going to be addressed in a big way next week when *Captain America: Civil War* opens in theaters around the country. This third Captain America movie will draw on threads that have been woven into the Marvel Cinematic Universe from its earliest pictures, bringing friends and allies into conflict over decisions that will have a lasting impact. The masterminds at Marvel Studios have been laying the groundwork for this upcoming clash of superheroes for years. If you've been watching the Marvel movies as they've come along, I'm thinking that you'll have a prime perspective on what's about to take place. You'll have a better understanding of just who these characters are and why it is that they are taking a stand for their differing beliefs.

Standing up for your beliefs isn't usually going to be an easy thing. Just think about it: when would you have to take a stand when there isn't someone or something trying to move you in a different direction? Taking a stand sets you up for conflict, because by doing so, you're saying that you're not going along with the opposition.

It might not always seem that way at first. This weekend, eight of the young people of our congregation are going to be up here in front of you all to take a stand for what they believe in the Rite of Confirmation. These candidates will be saying that they affirm the faith of their baptism, that they want to cross this stepping-stone of their growth in our life together. I'm hoping it'll be before a friendly audience! But make no mistake: there are parties in our world who would take this affirmation of faith as an act of war – civil war, even.

Civil war, despite the name, has nothing to do with civility. Instead of offering politeness or friendliness, this kind of war sees **parties who are united by a common bond torn apart from conflict within** their ranks. Something drives a wedge between the opposing sides. When we hear about civil wars on the news, read about them in the history books, they might be based in a “big issue”, or come as the result of one party seeking to overthrow another. But if you can look back at a civil war after the dust settles, **it's ultimately a battle to decide what happens next.**

The new Captain America movie is called *Civil War* with good cause. Without giving away too many details, the story sees the events of previous Marvel movies come back to haunt the characters we've grown to know and even care about. There's a push for the United Nations to oversee the actions of superheroes around the globe, rather than having them operate autonomously, seemingly above all authorities. On one side of the debate, Tony Stark – who once told a congressional hearing that they could forget having control of his Iron Man technology – has come to realize that it might be good to have government oversight after his AI creation Ultron almost killed off the human race. On the other side, Steve Rogers (Captain America) has grown wary of the corruption of authorities around him. When his lifelong friend becomes the object of a horrific frame-up, Cap decides that he has to take a stand for what he believes to be right, even if it means going up against some of his closest colleagues. The lines are drawn.

The events that follow don't just see Iron Man battling Captain America: it's not just about them. This *Civil War* is much bigger. At its core, this story centers on **the tension between freedom and authority.** What are the boundaries that should exist around what people are allowed to do, and what are the consequences if someone disregards those boundaries? If you do watch the movie, you might find that both sides seem to state their case with reasonable points: it's not as if one is clearly right and the other is wrong.

The players who come into this conflict gravitate to one side or the other for their own reasons. Some of them are personally loyal to Tony or Steve and wouldn't abandon them. Others feel that the cause itself is just and worth fighting for. And some, like Ant-Man, are simply thrilled to have been picked to help out. But as you'll see, characters on both sides come together to support each other. They're a greater force because no one hero has to stand on their own.

If you want to follow Jesus, you are going to have to take a stand every day. By virtue of being a Christian, you are going to be put at odds with forces that want you to go a different direction. There's something that every person, every creature, has as a common bond: we are part of the universe that God made. But sin drives a wedge between us human beings and between us and God. That leads to conflict. **You're in the middle of a civil war within creation.**

If you're going to follow Jesus, it means you won't be able to agree with or support actions that go against God's instruction. In a world that rebels against boundaries and against God's authority, you don't have to look too hard to find that kind of conflict. You will have to make choices. Sometimes those choices will be out there in the world, like if you'll support your friend in doing something that could harm them or other people or if you'll take a stand and talk them out of doing it. Your choices have consequences. That friend might walk away from you. You might find that people turn against you. But what would you lose if you don't take a stand?

Each of us has to face a closer conflict, too. A civil war's being fought inside our hearts and minds. On one side stands God's loving instruction and authority, while the other side is run by self-interest, backed up by sin. Sin keeps driving that wedge to turn us against God and against the people around us. While there's no question that God wants good for you as His child, the opposition makes points that seem to be good, too: why should you take a stand and follow God's instruction when you would be missing out on what would appear to be a more appealing way to live? Isn't your freedom more important than God's authority? **Like every other civil war, this one is another battle to decide what happens next.**

How does Marvel's *Civil War* turn out? Does #TeamCap or #TeamIronMan win out? There's a climatic battle that throws former allies against each other to decide what happens next. See it for yourself to find out what comes of it. But what of the civil war that's going on within creation, within you? How will that turn out?

"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." In Jesus, you may have peace. Even in a world of conflict and civil war, our living Lord Jesus stands for you. Even if you fail to follow him and go along with sin's side, Jesus offers hope. As he did with Peter, Jesus can bring restoration after failure.

As Jesus tells his disciples, "In the world you will have tribulation." Life will not be easy when you take a stand for your beliefs in following Jesus. You don't have to go it alone – and you shouldn't! We have community in Christ. We are here to support each other. Even more important than this, though, is the fact that you have the ultimate superpower at your side.

Christians can take comfort in knowing how it all ends: the ultimate battle has been waged and won, and Jesus is the victor. He has overcome the world and all the powers who opposed him. That's the good news that we hear in today's Gospel reading as Jesus prepares his disciples for his coming death and resurrection. In this season of Easter, we remember and celebrate that Jesus won the battle to decide what happens next for all of creation. He delivers the victory that will see all war come to an end. The sin that has driven us apart from God and from the people around us will be removed, and we will all be free to be as God created and called us to be in Christ. Through Jesus, you are a part of the victorious Kingdom of God.

Confirmation is an affirmation of your baptismal identity. Our confirmands have repeatedly heard us say, "Confirmation is not graduation," and that's true for all of us. What is God giving you to do now, or in the days and years ahead? You are each making a stand when you profess your faith – not saying that you are picking a side, but acknowledging that God has chosen you as His own child. As a child and heir of God's Kingdom, you are sent into the battle-wracked lives of hurting people all around to bring the news *and consequence* of Jesus' victory: peace. Peace with God and peace with each other.

When it comes down to it, would you take a stand for your beliefs like Steve Rogers or Tony Stark? Their story, while it might be a blockbuster, is still just a movie. But as you and I follow Jesus from Confirmation into civil war, he offers us peace. So take heart! Jesus has won the war.

Amen.