

You Asked for It: Take Me Out to the Ballgame
A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: I Corinthians 15:15-20

Few things can evoke a time for me more powerfully than my baseball glove, which accompanies me to every game I see. I have only to bury my face in its comforting well and drink deeply of its scent to be transported....back to summer evenings and the dusty field where my brother and sister and I learned to bat and catch from my father. . . . the smell of new-mown grass, the tang of mustard on a hotdog, the crack of bat contacting ball, the mysterious “K’s” and other hieroglyphic markings my dad made on his scorecard when he took us to a game. I recall the enjoyment of pitch and catch with my son. It’s all there. I’m right back there. I love baseball.... because it is inextricably linked for me to another time and place, when I was young and innocent and knew far more of the world’s wonder than its terror.

I love baseball, because it is woven into the fiber of America—our national pastime; but even more, emblematic of our national character. Baseball is a team sport exemplified by individual stand-outs; the interplay between the group and the lone player mirrors the social contract of democracy: individual rights and opportunity exercised within the context of the common good.

I love baseball, even though I am clear-eyed about its shortcomings. Nothing is pure, and consuming financial interests have so commodified its charms and mysteries that they have been nearly reduced to little more than entries in a ledger column. The strike, owner/player wars, drug scandals—all have dulled the shine. I wish it were less business and more national pastime.

More than one of you has pointed out that aside from all that, baseball is....well, slow. I actually read about a sportswriter from Kansas City who decided to find out how much “action” occurred in a baseball game. He took a stopwatch and counted the time it took the ball to leave the pitcher’s hand until it arrived at home plate. Then on all hit balls, he let the clock run until the batter was either out or safe. In the relatively short game of 2 hours, 28 minutes, the action time he recorded was a grand total of....8.5 minutes. And comedian George Carlin compared baseball and football this way: “In football, the goal is to march into enemy territory with a series of hard smashes and long bombs and break through to pay dirt. In baseball, the object is to go home!”

Well. Baseball is only a game (though, as George Will added: Yeah, and the Grand Canyon is only a hole in Arizona. Not all holes, or games, are created equal). [*Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball* by George Will. New York: MacMillan, 1990]

I love baseball, so when one of you requested a sermon on it, I was only too happy to comply. I want to suggest that baseball can be an effective metaphor describing the universal human journey, the circle of life. Metaphor helps us know the unknowable and comprehend the incomprehensible. Where words and theology and philosophical systems fail, pictures painted by metaphor may offer us a glimpse of truth, a window on understanding. Try this: baseball is life. There’s a certain commonality about it—the trajectory and transitions we share with every other living being on the planet. But what infinite variety of plays! What amazing possibilities and particular embellishments exist! Take this description of Indian immortal Bob Feller, by Detroit Tiger and Hall-of-Famer Hank Greenberg.

....the first time I ever batted against him was in 1937, when he was only 18 years old. He had such blinding speed and was so wild that everybody was afraid to go up to bat, including me. He had a very deceptive motion. You never knew where the baseball was coming from or where it was going, and neither did he. [Lawrence Ritter, *The Glory of Their Times*, New York: William Morrow, 1966, rev. 1984, p. 317]

Haven't you experienced life just that way? A little wild, not always what it seems, your blood pulsing a little quicker in anticipation of what today will bring. There's danger and beauty and promise and risk.

And the destination? Well, to go home you gotta leave home. What happens in the perilous, heady run around the bases is what makes coming home count. Arguably the greatest baseball writer of all time, Roger Angell, tells how the baseball season replicates the seasons of human life:

...with its beguiling April optimism, the cheerful roughhouse of June; the grinding, serious, unending (surely) business of mid-summer; the September settling of accounts when hopes must be traded for philosophies or brave smiles; and then the abrupt running down of autumn, when we wish for—almost demand—a prolong and glittering final adventure just before the curtain.

No matter what the season for any of us personally, it ain't over till it's over, and every game counts. It is for this time—before the curtain---that the apostle Paul identifies another reality, one perhaps not immediately apparent, but there. The morning text is a brief portion of a much lengthier passage in which Paul lays out the meaning of human life as it stares into the face of death. “Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, in what terms the good news is preached, in which you stand, and by which you are saved...” For Paul, the good news is intelligible only in a spiritual dimension, one that acknowledges a reality beyond that which is seen and heard. But he admits it's a mystery. Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the first letter to the Corinthians in the fifteenth chapter at the fifty-first verse [I COR. 15:51-58]

If you build it, he will come. So intones the voice Ray Kinsella hears in a short story from which came the movie *Field of Dreams*. The story unfolds as Ray, joined by his trusting wife and daughter, decides to follow the strange command and build a baseball diamond. Plowing up valuable corn acreage looks to his neighbors about as sensible as Noah's decision to build an ark on a cloudless day. But like Noah, Ray feels

compelled to obey the voice, the source of which he takes on faith.

The floods come—in this case, in the form of Shoeless Joe Jackson and other players from the notorious 1919 Chicago White Sox, the team on which eight members were charged with throwing the World Series and were banned from baseball forever. They come to play on Ray's field, and as they do, work out a kind of redemption both for themselves and for Ray as he confronts his own estrangement from his long-dead father.

We see the baseball players enter and depart the playing field through the adjoining cornfields. But not everyone can. Some characters assume Ray and his family have gone off the deep end as they sit on the bleachers cheering the players. Yet the film seems to be saying that only as one breaks out of confines of rationality will it be possible to experience a power beyond physical reality in the space-time continuum. Only a leap of faith will bridge the infinite distance between us and God.

It is *human* life that is transformed. In a scene dear to this Midwesterner's heart, Shoeless Joe surveys the breathtaking green of the countryside against a true blue horizon, and asks Ray, "Is this heaven?" "It's Iowa," he answers. Heaven can wait! It is this perishable nature that must put on the imperishable, the mortal which must put on immortality, this earthly part which glows with divine fire and life.

The movie invites us to believe...to believe in yourself and the voices that nudge you to action. Believe in the smile on future's face, even when it appears uncertain, even hopeless. Believe in your dreams. Believe that love overcomes all and endures to the end. But even more: belief can easily be reduced to naivete or wishful thinking without the transcendent dimension. The film, and the apostle Paul, push us to the edge: against all odds, beyond reason and intellect, believe in a power greater than your own strength; believe in a love deeper than that which you possess. Believe in God.

That belief contradicts the rampant cynicism of our day which insists the meaning of life is located only in what can be bought and sold, acquired and collected, contracted for, signed, sealed, delivered. Such cynicism is really fear---fear of detachment, oblivion, death. So we yearn to make the impermanent permanent and the perishable imperishable; the unknown known and as much as possible, controlled. Fact is, we often face our mortality like a hitter in a slump—imagining it's a pitcher against which we cannot hit.

Yet, incredibly, there is a way. There is One who faced death and lives to tell about it. Christ has broken Death's shut-out record and shows us how. Again a mystery only a metaphor can express: Death is swallowed up in victory!

But I know what you're thinking. Death shows no sign of giving up and shuffling back to the dugout. We have felt its sting in the loss of fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, friends whose absence is almost a physical pain. Can we believe....in the healing? In the victory?

Last month, an op ed piece appeared in the *New York Times* commemorating the shattering of baseball's longstanding racial barrier by Jackie Robinson. The writer repeated the oft-told story of how his white teammate Pee Wee Reese walked across the infield to put his arm around the first baseman, in a show of solidarity against the brutal heckling of the crowds. Except this time, the point of the article was to cast doubt on the incident, to say it was myth and never happened. When I read it, I felt that bitter taste of yet another heroic choice erased, another truth cast down. But then, two days later, author Roger Kahn fired back a letter to the editor:

On May 13, 1947, during Brooklyn Dodger infield practice [in Cincinnati], Pee Wee Reese suddenly stopped the practice. He walked diagonally across the infield and placed his left arm around the shoulder of Jackie Robinson. . . He looked into the Cincinnati dugout and the grandstands beyond. Players and fans had been taunting Robinson with terms like "shoe-

shine boy” and [worse]. Reese, a slim white Southerner, kept his arm draped in friendship around the sturdy black man. Reese did not say a word. But his look shamed the racists into silence. “After Pee Wee came over like that,” Robinson told me years later, “I never felt alone on a baseball field again.”

Friends, sometimes the stories are true. Kahn went on to write that Jackie Robinson had confirmed the episode in a 1970 interview. Later, Reese also confirmed the incident to Kahn himself and when the writer praised him, Reese shrugged it off. “I was just trying to make the world a little bit better. That’s what you’re supposed to do with you life, isn’t it?”

Like baseball, the journey of faith is animated by the true stories. We belong, in life and in death, to God. I don’t know precisely how the dead will be raised, or how this mortal nature will put on immortality. All you and I can do is commit ourselves, body and soul, to the One from whose love we can never be separated. To make our run around the bases an opportunity to make the world a little bit better. Listen, I tell you a mystery: in the end, we all will be safe at home.

THANKS BE TO GOD WHO GIVES US THE VICTORY THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST! AMEN.

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