

ONLY A GAME? DON'T THINK SO!

What's the gospel word on sports?

Isaiah 40:28-31; Philippians 3:12-16; Luke 4:1-13

I want to start this sermon by having us sing a hymn together.

Don't reach for your hymnbook, because it's not in there.

But don't worry.

You already know the tune and all the words by heart.

You've all sung it so often you could sing it in your sleep.

Although I'm sure you've *never* sung it here at Park View,
and perhaps *never* in any church anywhere.

Because it's *not* a hymn of the church.

It's a hymn of our culture.

John, take it away! . . . We obviously have to stand to sing it.

Take me out to the ball game,

Take me out with the crowd.

Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack,

I don't care if I never get back,

So let's root, root, root for the home team,

If they don't win it's a shame.

For it's one, two, three strikes, you're out,

At the old ball game.

See, there really is a first time for everything.

That song we just sang, to me, captures the essence,
the very best of what organized sports can offer us.

I'm a baseball fan.

I *never* played Little League.

Never played baseball in school.

Not sure if I could hit a fastball if my *life* depended on it.

In elementary school, even in such tame,
scaled-down versions of the game, like softball and kickball,

I was always one of the last chosen on playground pick-up teams,
and my classmates wouldn't let me forget it.

Nevertheless, I was endlessly fascinated
by these games played out on the diamond.

Baseball is a marvelous game.

It is endlessly complex.

It's a perfect combination of individual athleticism and teamwork.

It brings together a highly developed strategy and rationality,
with a wild unpredictability of umpires making
split-second and irreversible judgement calls.

It brings together neighbors and community members
on an almost daily basis
like few other sports do.

At least, it has *been* that kind of game.

A lot of things have conspired to radically change baseball—
and almost *every* professional sport—

to the point where it seems it's high time for Christians
who want to be faithful representatives
of the gospel in our culture,

to ask some hard questions of ourselves, and our sports culture,
from the pros, all the way down to church league ball games.

That baseball hymn we just sang was written in 1908.

It came from a very different era.

When the game built a genuine sense of community.

When because it wasn't on TV and the seats were cheap
it actually *brought* real neighbors together repeatedly,
so they *could* say "I don't care if I *never* get back,"
and *mean* it.

When baseball parks were much smaller,
and located in residential neighborhoods,
instead of entertainment districts.

When the parks were named after beloved local individuals,
rather than the highest-bidding corporation . . .

When ticket prices were modest
concessions menus were simple and cheap, and in *fact*,
not a whole lot more peanuts and Cracker-Jack . . .

When players had long-term relationships with their team,
and learned to know their fans
and contribute to the well-being of their hometown.

But not to paint *too* rosy a picture . . .

professional baseball has *always* had its problems.

Racism.

Corruption.

Athletes who failed as role models.

Violence.

And organized cheating . . .

most famously, by my beloved White Sox
in the 1919 World Series.

There probably never *was* a truly golden era for professional sports.

And Christians have a long history

of having uneasy relationships with pro sports.

In the late 1800s pro baseball was opposed by many clergy.

One Methodist minister wrote that baseball players were [quote]
“an idle and shiftless lot,” their pay was “ridiculously high.”

An Arkansas Baptist magazine proclaimed that baseball players
“could execute more devilry, use more profanity,
and make idiots of themselves in more ways”
than *anyone else* in society.

A Disciples of Christ writer exclaimed,

“Our national game?” No, it’s “one of our national curses!
Keep the boys *away* from it.”

Sure, there’s a degree of overreaction there. Some religious hysteria.

But, to what have we *now* come?

Are Christians any more thoughtful and reflective about it now?

Not only have churches come to *tolerate* professional sports,
we have come to embrace sports *uncritically*.

We even bring professional sports heroes into the church
to inspire our young people,
to put their individual Christian faith on display,
without ever *questioning* the values or practices
of the very enterprise that *pushed* them into the limelight.

Is there a gospel word on sports?

Should there *be* a gospel word?

Or is this all just fun and games, an innocent social pastime,
and we should let the gospel speak to more *important* matters?
Does sports *really* have such a firm grip on our culture?

Consider *this*.

The Pulitzer-Prize winning classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*
has sold fewer copies in the 50 years since it was published,
than *Sports Illustrated* sells every single month.

The *World Almanac* devotes more pages to sports
than for business, science, and politics *combined*.

A new American history textbook for fifth graders
treated the Great Depression and FDR’s presidency in 33 lines,
but devoted two pages to (one of *my* heroes)
retired Baltimore Oriole Cal Ripken Jr.

Sports *is* something we, and our culture, highly value.

We *do* allow it to form our identity as persons,
to shape our loyalty as members of a human community,
to prioritize how we spend our money, our time,
and our emotional energy?

And *yes*, the gospel speaks to matters of identity, loyalty,
and stewardship of resources.

But human beings have *always* valued athletic competition.

Even in biblical times, organized sports were present,
and influential enough that biblical writers
didn’t think *twice* about using sports
to make a point about the Christian life.

Biblical sports metaphors include
racing, boxing, and athletic training.

We heard one of these texts this morning.

In Philippians 3 the Apostle Paul talked about life as a race,
“forgetting what lies behind and
straining forward to what lies ahead,
pressing on toward the goal.”

We need this kind of encouragement.

We could also have read 1 Corinthians 9,
which reminds us we run the race *together*.

And the apostle adds, “I do not run aimlessly,
nor do I box as though beating the air.”

And we heard the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 40,
remind us that God gives us strength when we are weak.

Like a marathon runner about to fall exhausted,
God will lift us up, renew our strength,
give us wings like eagles.
So we can run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

But we can't stop with those texts.

I think when it comes to modern sports,
there is more biblical discernment to be done,
than read the verses that say
run hard, train hard, push yourself to the end.
There's much *wisdom* in these texts, pertaining to the Christian life:
persistence, discipline, working together.

But there is more to be said,
at least if we dare allow ourselves to hold up the culture of sports
and shine a gospel light on it.

Perhaps today's gospel story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness
has more to say to us, in our sports-obsessed culture.

Jesus was tempted three times to veer away
from his God-given identity and calling,
and to become something less than God *meant* him to be . . .
when Satan presented him with these powerful temptations
to prove his worthiness by working a miracle,
turning stone into bread and satisfying his hunger . . .
to be given immense wealth and power and fame . . .
and to do the spectacular, to consider himself invincible.

Can you think of any sports heroes who fell for those temptations?

Can you think of many who *haven't*?
Including the (quote) "Christian" ones?

In using sports metaphors,
Biblical writers could not have envisioned
the dominating force that sports has become in our culture,
a force that is economic, psychological, social, and
yes, religious.

In 2005 the Pope convened a major international symposium in Rome,
led by the Church and Sport Section
of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.
Scholars, athletes, coaches, and clergy from all over the world
came together for this spiritual sports summit.
They issued a summary paper afterward,
containing, as you would expect, a number of affirmations
for the positive role sports can play in our lives.
But they also issued this strong cautionary word, and I quote:

"In many people's lives,
sport has acquired an importance
that goes *beyond* that of mere amusement or entertainment.
For many of our contemporaries sport has become a way of life . . .
a factor that . . . determines a sense of identity and belonging,
[and] the meaning of life itself.
And that is not all: sport has become, in every respect,
a surrogate for religious experience . . .
In our secularized society,
sports events have taken on the character of collective rituals . . .
Stadiums and gymnasiums are like temples to this
'new religion' . . .
Far from [aiding] the healthy growth of the individual person,
the practice of sport is increasingly threatening people . . .
enslaving them to themselves, to imposed fads and fashions,
and to the [economic] interests
which are concealed behind sports events."

Only a *game*? We should, at *least*, wonder.

But I'm *still* an avid sports fan.

As are many of you.
I thoroughly enjoy *this* time of year.
The World Series is thrilling competition.
I freely admit I'll be watching it tonight.
Although some of you would be happier if it was
World Cup soccer,
or the bowl season of College Football
or March Madness, the Stanley Cup, the Super Bowl,

Wimbledon, or the Masters.

Is it okay to get *excited* about these things?

I certainly hope so.

Because I don't think I can just turn off a switch
and become disinterested.

But is there a spiritual or moral limit to my fandom?

How many of you admit, as *I* do, to being a sports *fan*?

Do you know the meaning of the word "fan"?

Fan is simply a short form of the word fanatic,
which comes from the Latin word *fanaticus*,
meaning "inspired by a deity, frenzied."

And that word derives from *fanum*, Latin for "temple."

In a temple, frenzied, inspired by something god-like.

Hmmm.

Sounds like the modern use of the word,
isn't *too* far from the original, is it?

So how *should* a Christian be a fan?

What does a fan look like,
who has been shaped *first* by the gospel,
and only *secondarily*, by the sport?

How does a gospel-shaped fan
root, root, root for the home team?

Does cheering on our favorite athletes necessarily *have* to include
joining in with all the mob behavior that sports has made normal?

Like boo-ing opposing players?

Or boo-ing one of our *own* players
who made an unfortunate mistake?

Or hurling verbal abuse on the officials?

And let's not *imagine* this kind of behavior
is limited to professional sports.

We've *all* seen it evidenced by parents at their own kids' games.

Even, *occasionally*, at church-league games.

I've *often* seen it at our own small-town baseball institution,

the Harrisonburg Turks,

which Irene and I frequent on summer evenings.

I've been known to groan loud enough to be heard by the ump,
or to holler out a one-word question . . . "Whaaaaa-aaatt?"

But I do draw the line at name-calling,

or shouting insults,

or boo-ing the players or officials.

I just can't bring myself to *do* that,

even though our sports culture *blesses* that behavior
as just "part of the game."

If sports are supposed to be a character-building enterprise,

and teach us the lofty values of teamwork and

the persistent pursuit of excellence,

why *wouldn't* a gospel-shaped fan

find *some* measure of joy in seeing an excellent performance,
even if it occurred on the *other* team?

why *wouldn't* we cheer and congratulate *anyone*

who made a truly outstanding play,

and exhibited the highest level of athleticism?

Once in a *great* while,

this kind of sportsmanship comes out in amazing ways.

Often by the players themselves.

A couple years ago, a women's softball player of average ability,

in her senior year at Western Oregon University,

did something she never did in all her four years of college,
or high school.

She hit a home run.

But after rounding first base, she collapsed with a knee injury,
and couldn't make it any further.

Rules dictate a runner has to touch all four bases to score a home run.

If a pinch runner is sent in, it's only a single.

If any of her teammates assist her, she's automatically out.

So while she lay on the ground in pain,

two of the players on the *opposing* team, Central Washington,
came to her aid, and carried her around the bases,

helping her touch every bag,

and giving her the home run she deserved,
and keeping *them* from moving on to the championship.
Sportsmanship? I would say so.
But even *more*,
it's what the gospel word would have said for us to do.

Even on the athletic field,
God's priorities don't *change*, do they?
Doesn't God *still* have compassion for those in pain,
for the least of these,
for the weaker ones among us?

Is it *necessary* to *forget* that little gospel truth,
in order to be a good athlete, or a good fan?
Must we wish ill on all our opponents?
Must we sulk in despair when the better team wins,
and it's not *our* team?

Geoff Bowden, a professor at Malone, in Ohio,
wrote an essay about Christian fandom,
which he entitled, creatively,
“Would Jesus wear face-paint?”

In that essay, he says this:
“Good-natured competition and light-hearted ribbing
of opposing fans and referees
constitutes a moral practice that is healthy for us,
but only if we keep it properly ordered
within the larger hierarchy of human goods.
When we begin to think being a fan is an activity
that can be wholly separated from being Christian,
we have crossed a line.
No activities, relationships, or practices
are outside the lordship of Christ.”

Now, some people might object to taking this all too seriously.
It's only for fun.
It's only a game.
Sports is kind of like theater.

We only *pretend* to love the hero and hate the villain.

But when we devote so much of our time and emotional energy
cheering for our teams,
and villifying the teams we love to hate,
I do have to wonder if it does anything to our patterns of thinking,
if it impacts our emotional responses to *other* life situations.
Does it prepare us for a gospel-shaped life,
in which our identity in Christ
makes it instinctive to pick up those who have fallen down,
rather than pass by on the other side?
Does it prepare us for a gospel-shaped life,
in which we are called to give our all to God,
and to God's kingdom?

Would you turn in your hymnal to #389,
“Take my life and let it be consecrated . . .”

Before we start singing this song,
position yourself where you are in regard to sports,
as an avid fan,
as a parent of a young player,
as a coach,
or as a player yourself, at the youth league level,
or on a school team, high school or college.
Be thinking of yourself and your relation to sports,
as we sing together
about these parts of our lives that we consecrate to God.

And if you are one (of the very few here)
who have no interest or connection to sports at all,
then think of whatever it is you *are* passionate about,
and place yourself in that role as we sing together,
prayerfully.

*Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.
Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.*

*Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King.
Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from Thee.
Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect, and use every power as Thou shalt choose.*

*Take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is Thine own; it shall be Thy royal throne.
Take my love, my Lord, I pour at Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for Thee.*

—Phil Kniss, October 31, 2010