

On Stadiums & Pencils

*“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete,
but only one receives the prize?
Run in such a way that you may win it!”
(1 Corinthians 9:24)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, **October 15, 2017**
(Volume 1 Number 15)
Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

October’s Major League Baseball championship series, soon to narrow the four remaining teams – Yankees and Astros, Cubs and Dodgers – down the two teams of the World Series, has me thinking of the stadiums I’ve visited to enjoy America’s pastime. Though I grew up (as boys in Arkansas were wont to do in the 60s) a Cardinal fan, I became in the 80’s a devoted fan of my Detroit Tigers, taking in many ballgames each summer at Tiger Stadium, the corner of Michigan and Trumbull. I would often join the “bleacher creatures” for a mere five bucks, and occasionally splurge for a box seat for the entire family.

Ah, baseball! Like generations of Americans I thought the national anthem to be an indispensable part of the game, and fans could be forgiven were they to regard the last two words to be, “*Play Ball!*” Dad taught me the value of tradition, standing for the 7th inning stretch to sing “*Take me out to ballgame,*” a promise of our soon return for “*peanuts and Cracker Jack.*”

In the middle of my Detroit years (1989) baseball fans reveled in the film, *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner playing Ray Costello, an Iowa farmer who mysteriously felt called to build a baseball diamond right in the middle of his Iowa cornfield. “*If you build it, he will come,*” the mantra of the film, became axiomatic in virtually any entrepreneurial endeavor requiring faith. Friends and family questioned Ray’s sanity, leading to one of the best-recognized monologues in cinematic history, when Terrence Mann says (in the rich baritone voice of James Earl Jones), “*People will come, Ray. They’ll come to Iowa for reasons they can’t even fathom. They’ll turn up your driveway not knowing for sure why they’re doing it. They’ll arrive at your door as innocent as children, longing for the past . . . And they’ll walk out to the bleachers; sit in shirtsleeves on a perfect afternoon . . . And they’ll watch the game and it’ll be as if they dipped themselves in magic waters. The memories will be so thick they’ll have to brush them away from their faces. People will come Ray. The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game: it’s a part of our past, Ray. It reminds of us of all that once was good and could be again. Oh, people will come Ray. People will most definitely come.*”

Occasionally I dip myself in those magic waters, recalling our summer vacations rotating between Houston and St. Louis to follow the Astros and the Cardinals. Unforgettable was the

trip when, as a 12 year old boy, we saw Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale pitch back-to-back nights at the sparkling new Houston Astrodome.

When I think of the baseball stadiums of my childhood I think of pencils. A younger generation might wonder at that. Pencils? Yes, was a time when pencils were a hot item at the concession stand. Many fans wouldn't dream of watching a game without keeping a written record of every hit, walk, out, error, wild pitch, stolen base, and run scored. It's a venerable tradition dating to baseball's beginnings, but scorekeeping by fans has become a quaint relic of baseball's history.

Before mom and dad went to assisted living my trips to Pine Bluff would often find me in dad's office sifting through his programs of old games. Dad always kept score, teaching me as a kid who that I later spent my college summers as a scorekeeper (when I wasn't on the field umpiring).

My friend John Benton Meador showed me a program from Chicago's Wrigley Field in 1949. The pricing section reads like a museum relic. The most expensive admission price was \$2 for a box seat. Candy bars and chewing gum were a nickel, hot dogs fifteen cents, Borden's ice cream one thin dime. Then I saw it, right there on the program -- you could buy a pencil at the concession stand for five cents. I doubt many pencils are sold at games in our day, fans instead entertained with Jumbo-tron scoreboards the size of Rhode Island. Pencils seem somehow silly. Who's going to look down after a play and write on the program when you can look up and see the replay in HD from multiple angles? Pencils? No, scoring rhymes with boring.

I'm glad it wasn't boring in 1949. John Benton kept score that game, so I can tell you that when the Cubs played the Boston Braves 68 summers ago they faced Hall of Fame pitcher Warren Spahn, who pitched a complete game, winning 12 – 4, one of his 363 career victories.

I know these things because someone was kept score. They still are, of course. Keeping records is part of sports. The official scorekeeper is necessary, because -- now listen carefully -- inside those baselines, that magical diamond, a whole world of rules exist which have absolutely no relevance to the outside world. For me, baseball is the pinnacle of team sports, the near perfect game marching to a 3-3 beat, the measured triad by which the game flows. Three strikes and you're out. Three outs and the side is retired. Three by three by three we go for nine innings. Amazing structure! Amazing symmetry!

Using athletic imagery this morning I'm following a tradition established by Paul, who was fond of athletic imagery. Paul was a Roman, intimately familiar with the Greco-Roman traditions of the Mediterranean world. If Jesus used analogies from the agricultural and fishing culture of the Galilee – “*a sower going forth to sow,*” “*follow me and fish for people*” -- Paul used analogies from his world, images that would speak to the culture he was addressing.

Baseball wasn't around 2,000 years ago but had it been there's no doubt in my mind Paul would have used it. He made analogies of the sports that were popular — Olympic-style competitions such as running, boxing, and wrestling. Many scholars think his tent-making trade during the 18 months he spent in Corinth were in part to house the thousands of fans and participants from throughout the Roman world attending the Isthmian games, played near Corinth every other year.

No wonder, in his letter to Corinth, Paul wrote, “*Do you not know that on a racetrack (Greek = Stadion = stadium) the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize?*” Here’s the ancient *stadion* in Delphi, Greece as it looks today, though it was already some 400 years old when Jesus lived. This is the environment Paul would have known, *stadions* dotting the Greco-Roman world with one of the ancient world’s largest games near Corinth.



Paul taught about living a godly life in terms of training, self-discipline, and striving for excellence and victory, inundating his reader with the world of the gymnasium. “*Train yourself in godliness,*” he wrote to Timothy, “*for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come*” (1 Timothy 4:7b, 8). The word *train* is *gymnasia* in Greek, ancestor to our word *gymnasium*. For Paul the gymnasium was a symbol of life, the development not merely of muscles for athletic contests, but wholeness of being — physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually.

There’s another lesson from sport that I want to emphasize this morning -- commitment to a three-fold limitation. First, play is limiting with regard to *Space*. We speak of a baseball diamond, a football field, a tennis court, a boxing ring, a golf course, a race track. The field of play is a hallowed, consecrated spot where special rules obtain, a magic, albeit temporary world.

The second way play is limiting is with respect to *Time*. Games have a beginning and an end, a first pitch and a last out, a tip-off and a game-ending buzzer, an opening kick-off and a Hail Mary opportunity before the clock expires and it’s too late, all opportunities for miracles vanished.

Third, play is limiting as to *Action*. Within those limited boundaries of *space* and *time* exist limited *action*, rules concerning what is allowable and disallowed. This gives rise to umpires and referees and, in our modern world, careers in rules compliance to help universities avoid misstepping (thus ending careers and ruining reputations, as we’ve seen recently).

All three limitations – space, time, and action -- must exist for any game to be defined as sport. Shifting now to basketball, Jeff Meek this week loaned me a copy of the very first rules of basketball, signed by the game’s inventor, James Naismith, who created the game at the age of 30 in 1891 at the YMCA in Springfield, Massachusetts. The originals of rules were hanging for

the players to see. Naismith wrote the original basketball rule book and founded the University of Kansas basketball program, living to see basketball adopted as an Olympic event at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, as well as the birth of the National Invitation Tournament (1938) and the NCAA Tournament (1939). Here's the original basketball court in Springfield in 1891, using a peach basket as the goal.



Let's shift analogies again, this time to golf. When we speak of rules it seems to me that golf, where rules are often self-enforced, is a prime example. In the 2001 final round of the British Open, Ian Woosnam was a contender and moved even further up the Leaderboard with a birdie on the first hole, within a whisker of a hole in one. That's when disaster struck. Woosnam's caddie discovered that his bag had an extra club (a golfer can only carry fourteen). He had been practicing with a different driver on the driving range and the caddie failed to remove it from his bag before the match. The penalty for this infraction is two strokes per hole. Woosnam informed the officials on himself, who assessed the two stroke penalty, turning birdie into bogie and throwing him into such mental agony that virtually demolished any chance he had of winning the British Open.

Why is such a rule necessary? What does it matter if an extra club has made its way into the bag? That extra club on that single hole at the British Open didn't affect his play, nor the play of others around him. "*It's not fair!*" he might have cried.

Sport's 3-fold limitation -- *Space, Time, Action* -- teach that rules are necessary because play means something only when the rules are applied. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life, play brings a temporary, limited perfection where life must go according to rules. We can't understand a world where a madman opens fire on concert-goers. In the real world, rules don't seem to apply. Virtually every newspaper has another story of human action that makes no sense, possesses no decency, no honor, and respects no boundaries.

Sport, though, is a magical, albeit temporary, world where the rules must apply, and the least deviation from the rules spoils the game, leaving the play world to collapse. *The Legend of Bagger Vance* is a film based on a book by Steven Pressfield. Set in the Great Depression, May 1931, Bagger Vance is a caddie who appears as if from nowhere, a mysterious, Melchizedek-type stranger without past or future. Bagger represents the divine presence to a tortured soul named Junah whose wartime experience in World War 1 as the only survivor of his unit had left him empty, suffering an agony he came to treat with the stupor of alcohol. Junah was a lost soul, wandering still in the senselessness of war, the carnage he had witnessed. It would be the rules of play that recovered for him a world that made sense.

Before the war, Junah had been a local Georgia golf star, and now he is asked to come back and play a Depression-era exhibition match with Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen, two of the great golfers of that day. On the last day of the tournament Junah has a chance to win. As he prepares to make his approach shot on the 17th hole, disaster strikes. Listen to the story as it's narrated by Dr. Hardison Greaves, who had been a 10 year old boy in 1931, and was walking with the pair).

“Junah was ready . . . there was a loose stalk of grass blowing about two feet behind Junah’s ball; with his clubhead he nonchalantly flicked it, it blew away in the wind. Junah took a step toward the ball . . . the ball moved! An inch. No more . . . My heart froze in terror . . . He knew the rule as well as I. As well as every golfer. A player may remove without penalty a loose impediment lying within a club-length of the ball, but ‘if the ball moves after any such loose impediment has been touched . . . the player shall be deemed to have caused the ball to move and the penalty shall be one stroke.’” It counted for nothing that Junah hadn’t touched the ball, that his actions had not been the cause of its moving. All that mattered was that it had moved . . .

“It wasn’t fair! Then, still in the first two tenths of a second, my brain seized upon a terrible alternative. No one had seen the ball move. Not even Bagger Vance, who was ten feet down the hill. Just Junah and I. In the three-inch grass no one else could see it. No one would know. We could lie. Pretend nothing happened. Just hit the ball. Say nothing. This thought flashed like an evil comet across my brain. Was Junah thinking it, too?

“But he was already turning away toward the fairway . . . Junah’s voice rose clear and firm above the wind. ‘I have to call a shot on myself . . .’

“My glance turned to Bagger Vance . . . he moved beside Junah and spoke, almost too softly to hear. ‘In this hour,’ he whispered, ‘you have reached me.’”

The lesson of Bagger Vance, indeed of sport itself, is willing commitment to the rules, even when we know we can’t be caught. This is honor. This is integrity. Junah had risen above the mangled senselessness of war and now, in a game, rediscovers shape and form.

Commitment to rules is important. Moving from sports into a real game of life, consider marriage. Marriage is a sacred, hallowed ground, limiting in the same three ways. As to *space*, marriage is meant to be a haven from the world, a place of companionship and peace and joy. As for *time*, marriage has a beginning and an end, ideally, “*til death do we part.*” Within those limitations of space and time there are rules to which we commit ourselves, expressing our commitment to those rules in what we call, vows.

We sometimes face the same temptation as Junah. *No one will know. We can lie.* But we learn that deviation from the rule diminishes the worth of marriage. When that happens, until forgiveness and reconciliation is achieved, the play world collapses.

One more short golf story, this one from the 1968 Masters. Argentine golfer Roberto De Vincenzo was set for a play-off with Bob Goalby to decide the winner of the fabled Green Jacket.

But Roberto had mistakenly signed for a four at the 17th hole, a hole the whole world had seen him birdie with a 3. It didn't matter that the whole world knew he made the 3. He signed for a 4. That's a cardinal rule of golf -- once a player signs the scorecard, it is official. The officials could only go by the mark of the pencil! De Vincenzo lost the match, and his quote is famous for its poignancy, "*What a stupid I am!*"

I suppose we've all felt like that from time to time. "*What a stupid I am!*" We wonder, knowing our faults so intimately, is there a scorecard for our lives, a divine marking of errors? Job thought so. "*If I sin, you mark me, and will not acquit me of my iniquity.*" For Job, God never forgot his pencil, marking everything. Every K. Every strikeout of life. Are all such moments duly recorded? Is God such a God who will only go by the mark of the pencil?

If so, we're in trouble, because our scorecards are filled with K's (in theological terminology -- failures, shortcomings, sins, transgressions). Grace means that God, through Jesus Christ, has accomplished atonement – *at one ment*. At the moment of repentance, of confession God moves toward us as Bagger Vance did to Junah to whisper words of grace, "*In this hour, you have reached me, you are at one with me.*"

Let us then, with the psalmist, give thanks. "*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered*" (130:3, 4).

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