

The Glory of Their Times

Let us now praise famous men, our fathers that begat us . . .

*All these were honored in their generations,
and were the glory of their times.*

(Ecclesiasticus 44:1, 7; The Wisdom of Sirach – 200 B. C.)

*And what more should I say? I have not time to tell of Gideon,
Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets . . .*

*the world was not worthy of them . . . yet all these,
though approved because of their faith, did not receive what had been promised.*

*God had foreseen something better for us,
so that without us they should not be made perfect.*

(Hebrews 11:32, 38-40 – New American Bible)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, **July 8, 2018**

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I'm in a bit of a baseball mood on this second Sunday of July. Sure, I may take in a few games, but mostly I gravitate toward a baseball film or book. As a lover of theology I find baseball to be a game with a Trinitarian flare. Three strikes and you're out, three outs and the side is retired, 3x3x3 through nine innings. Multiples of three abound in a game where the triple play is the quintessential defensive feat, and a full 27 outs (9 x 3) are needed for a victory.

For me baseball invites reflection, inviting me more to the past than to the present, exporting me back to a time when the diamond was a much more prominent part of my summers -- either as a player, a Babe Ruth and American Legion umpire and official scorer, and certainly as a fan paying much more attention than I do now. Ah, "*The Good Old Days.*"

Three or four years ago Sherry and I spent three or four summer days in New York City. It happened to be that while we were there the Yankees were hosting the Mets. I cared enough to check the schedules but, while enticed, I didn't care enough to go, even though Yankee Stadium was a mere subway ride away. Checking available seats and prices before leaving Little Rock, *Ticketmaster* had two seats on the first row behind the Met's dugout. The price? \$1600 per ticket! Had I been a teenager and these the 1968 Cardinals, I would have been begging dad for those tickets. He would have said "*No,*" of course, as did I. We found some upper deck bleacher seats reasonably priced and put them in the Online Cart, but before I could click Pay, I opted out.

Reflecting upon that later, I wondered why I would choose a 2nd Broadway play over a rare opportunity to watch the Yankees and Mets? My answer was clear -- because these days I know so few names. The players seem, to me, not the famous men, not those honored in their generations as the *Glory of their Times*. Pondering an evening at the ballpark in Yankee Stadium, it just wouldn't be like 1968 when I listened to the Cardinals every summer day on KOTN, Cotton Radio in Pine Bluff, Harry Cary and Jack Buck calling the game. Easily could I

still recite all nine in the line-up of the 1968 National League champion Cardinals: Lou Brock, Curt Flood, Roger Maris, Orlando Cepeda, Mike Shannon, Tim McCarver, etc. I wager I could get within ten points of their season batting averages, not to mention listing the entire pitching rotation anchored by Bob Gibson. In my baseball world, these men, these, were the *Glory of their Times*, certainly the glory of MY teenage times. Ah, the Good Old Days!

These days, though, but for a few names I have no idea the rosters, today's stars. I simply don't know the names of those who are, today, the *Glory of their Times*. That phrase from Ecclesiasticus, by the way, is the title of a 1966 baseball book by Lawrence Ritter: *The Glory of their Times: The story of the early days of baseball told by the men who played it*. Inspired by Ty Cobb's death in 1961, Ritter determined not to let the giants of the game die before he interviewed them, seeking out baseball's greatest players from the early 1900s.

I recently read a Wall Street Journal essay titled *Baseball and It's Aging Fans* by Susan Jacoby.

The subtitle is, *Can a game with a 19th Century Tempo Survive in the Age of Digital Distraction?* I've stacked two images here. The top is from Yankee Stadium, the very photo from the Jacoby article. With the bottom image of a church I want to show, not just the aging fans of the stadium, but the aging "fans" of the sanctuary. The parallelism of the flow of the people is intentional. What, did you think I would only talk about baseball this morning? Of course not, so let's get to work blending the Stadium and the Sanctuary, and its aging fans.



Jacoby points out how baseball sentimentalists regard the game as being just like life, proceeding at a slow pace with a mix of challenges and opportunities, elation and sadness. There are moments we shine – stealing a base, doubling off the wall, snagging the ball before it clears the fence to rob the batter of a home run. But there are also moments we can look like a goat, taking a called third strike with the bases loaded, fumbling an easy grounder, dropping the pop up. Through it all the game unfolds, just like life.

Jacoby writes, “*What could be further from the way we live now, in a culture of constant digital distraction, than a clockless game that demands patience and sustained attention from players and fans alike.*” True. In the 60s I would go to the games with a pencil and keep score of every hit and error. Today, fans are entertained with Jumbotron the size of Rhode Island.

To be sure, baseball looks healthy enough. Despite trailing the NFL and the NBA in television ratings, the box office is rock solid (how else could they charge \$1600 for a prime seat?). But, she writes, “*There’s a demographic catch. Major League Baseball has the oldest fan base of any major sport.*” I checked the Nielsen report yesterday for 2017 stats, finding that 50% of viewers are 55 and older. The average age of a television fan for a Major League Baseball game is 53, compared to 47 for the NFL and a youthful 37 for the NBA.

Is this not parallel to commentary on the church? In many ways the church is rock solid, and yet owns a demographic not without concern. Nationwide the average age of United Methodists, according to the Pew Research Center, climbed to 57 in 2014, and remains today at 57. The Presbyterians are a bit older with a median age of 59, and even the Southern Baptist Convention has topped 50, today at 54 years old. The Roman Catholics are the first major denomination coming in under 50, at 49.

Now in my 44th year in the pulpit, having begun ministry in 1974 at the tender age of 20, I’ve had a front row seat to these demographic shifts. My pastoral journey has taken me through county-seat towns like Fordyce and Warren, as well as metro areas like Little Rock. It’s clear that in the rural areas where county seat cities themselves are losing young families, the graying of the church is far more pronounced. In the city, such as my previous pastorate in west Little Rock, our average age plummeted from the upper 50s to the mid-30s.

While our own church is a bit gray 😊, our unique demographic in the Village is a stand alone statistical anomaly, the Village being a gated community with a high percentage of retirees who remain active, involved, and service-oriented.

Now, back to baseball. Jacoby interviewed Rob Manfred, the commissioner of MLB, who points out that that baseball remains the sport played by the largest number of children under twelve. Now, listen to Commissioner Manfred and notice how it sounds like church leadership discussions. “*The real challenge is to keep kids interested after (12), with all the competition for their attention.*” Does that not sound like a church leadership meeting, addressing parental passion in discussing how to attract and keep their post-confirmation, post-youth group kids involved in church? How many times I’ve heard the parents of teens and college age kids pleading to come up with new ways to keep their kids interested and involved. I must say I find it refreshing to know that the Commissioner of MLB has the same concerns!

What to do, she asks, when for youth the exquisite tension of a 1-0 ballgame is considered boring for not enough scoring. Time and patience are essential ingredients of this game, and the game has addressed this lack of patience in a number of ways designed to give the batter an advantage, such as lowering the mound, shrinking the strike zone, and making balls and bats livelier. The more I read the article the more I felt it was point-by-point like discussions of church leadership, the church having their own counterparts to lowering the mound and making the bats lively.

A second essay I read was titled “*The Good Old Days Are Now,*” by Michael Tackett. The first sentence grabbed me, “*Baseball is a game so obsessed with its past that it borders on being self-destructive.*” This, he points out, despite the fact that the game is played at a higher level today

than ever before. Baby Boomers like me may see the current game as too indulgent of the individual, too lacking in fundamentals, too reliant on showmanship. Truth be told, that's the same things our parents were saying when Mantle was playing. Here's the *New York Times*:

*Oh, give us the glorious matches of old,
when love of true sport made them great,
and not this new-fashioned affair
always sold for the boodle they take at the gate.*

The year that was written in the Times? 1886! Ah, for the Good Old Days!

Baseball's nostalgia – and the church's -- is a virtue carrying the seed of a disease. In both the Stadium and the Sanctuary, nostalgia dulls one's senses to being able to recognize the really amazing level of play today. In fact, we are in what will one day come to be known by as the Good Old Days. "Baseball," he wrote, "is the one business that considers it good strategy to tell you its product is less than what it used to be." True this is, despite the fact that baseball is played at a higher level than ever. I think in this respect the church parallels that of baseball – we're working at a much higher level today than we generally realize!

He wrote, "If Mickey Mantle ever saw a Noah Syndergarrd fastball, he would never stop crying. If Babe Ruth faced Clayton Kershaw, he would call the Dodgers lefty a witch and want him burned at the stake for black magic. There were no good old days. The good old days are now." Mantle and Ruth! Could he have chosen two more luminous names to make his point? These, these were the *Glory of their Times*. Snydergaard and Kershaw? I couldn't pick them out of a line-up. Yet these, too, evidently, are the glory of THEIR times, a time that will soon enough and by another generation be looked back upon as the *Good Old Days*.

The question for us becomes, how shall we become the *Glory of OUR Times*? Our bishops, our clergy, our professional staff, our lay servant leadership – how shall we become the *Glory of OUR Times*? Martin Buber tells the story of a rabbi named Zusya, that before his death he told his followers, "In the coming world, they will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

Let me make this personal and supply my name, though I hope you will supply your own. In the time to come, I won't be asked "Why were you not Luther? Calvin? Wesley?" The question will be, "Why were you not Siegfried, living faithfully into the calling upon YOUR life, for YOUR times?" I walk down the hallway and see the portraits on the wall of the five previous senior pastors of Christ of the Hills in its now 30 year history, organized on January 3, 1988 with 43 Charter Members. It's humbling to be counted among these now six senior pastors. Yet, as for ministry at St. James, I will not be asked, "Why were you not Chic Johnson, or R. T. Jarrell, or Bill Leslie or Mike Morey or Bubba Smith? Why did you not do the same things they did?" The question will be, "Why were you not Siegfried?"

Like baseball, the diamond upon which the church works may seem the same for its stable features, but it isn't. In so many ways, the game has changed. Were pastors from 100 years ago, or even 40 years ago when I began, dropped into the environment of today's church and culture,

they would likely find today's challenges as daunting as they are different, sort of like Babe Ruth facing Clayton Kershaw. Some of that is simply day-to-day operations, in the ways a church must operate administratively, but that's a small part of the change in church leadership. Multiple worship venues and styles have added new dimensions to a church's DNA and, often enough, tension. This is something my ancestors in the pulpit never had to face, nor did I prior to about 15 years ago.

This is true across the spectrum of church life, from intensely practical questions such as how many parking spaces we must have in a culture where a family of four may come to church in four cars, to the deeper biblical and spiritual questions of how we are to relate to a rapidly changing culture on key societal issues surrounding human sexuality and marriage, the church finding itself today – with traditional views and values straining against adaptation to the culture -- on the fringe of a rapidly changing Western culture rather than within the mainstream where we are accustomed to dwell.

The bishops, clergy, and lay leadership of the 50s and 60s faced their issues, and they were huge -- racism and civil rights. These were the *Glory of their Times*. How then, shall we become the *Glory of OUR times*? Every one of the names in the line-up of the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11 (which we read earlier) faced challenges distinct to their generation. All had in common that they were pilgrims on a journey that did not bring them fully into the possession of what they were seeking. I love the conclusion to Hebrews 11:

*And what more should I say? I have not time to tell of Gideon,
Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets . . .
the world was not worthy of them . . . yet all these,
though approved because of their faith, did not receive what had been promised.
God had foreseen something better for us,
so that without us they should not be made perfect.*

Those last words have stayed with me, “*so that WITHOUT US they should not be made perfect.*” I’ve looked at those men on the wall, a line-up in which I am, these days, standing in the batter’s box. I’ve known and highly regarded them all, save for the first, who passed away to enter ultimate glory when I had barely entered our clergy connection. I suppose I could think of my own ministry as faithfully preserving the legacy of these pastors and the visionary laity they served in their time. This text, though, makes it clear that we are all on a journey and that “*without us*” (you and me) their work cannot be made perfect.

Our congregation has had some good old days, from the days of our beginning with 43 Charter Members. When I pause to catch my breath in this life of this incredible congregation, I start to see things that could easily be taken for granted – an amazing Staff, a plethora of programs, incredible music and choral programs, consistently adding new families, faithful stewardship despite the challenges. If we don’t pay attention, we might miss it: these are the Good Old Days!

I read piece by Tom Brokaw, author of “*The Greatest Generation.*” He told about a quiet hero, a teacher he recalled who came to his home town in a Chevy sedan in 1952 to teach Mr. Brokaw’s 7th grade class. This teacher, Harlan Holm, was only 28, but to Tom, he carried himself with the

gravitas of a seasoned banker or church elder, always in a suit and never without a hat when he stepped outside. At 91 he died a few years ago, this quiet modest teacher who had first inspired a young Tom Brokaw. Only with Mr. Hahn's obituary did Mr. Brokaw learn of his teacher's six battle stars from World War 2. He uttered not one word of such heroism in that 7th grade classroom.

Perhaps you have a teacher, someone who mentored you, inspired you, opened a new way of thinking for you. What a blessing it might be for them, and for yourself, if you take pen and paper this week and write them a note telling them what a difference they made in your life, and how you consider them to be "*honored in your generation, the glory of your times.*"

Sherry and I were in Normandy two weeks ago, I leading a cruise of 22 Arkansans from Paris to Normandy. As our eyes scanned the 9000+ white crosses at the American Cemetery at Omaha Beach, it occurred to me that these were not at all "*famous men, the fathers that begat us.*" No, most of these died on those beaches too young to be either famous or fathers.

Still, while the first part of our passage from Ecclesiasticus we cannot claim for them, we can the rest, for these "*are honored in their generation, and were the Glory of their Times.*" Or, as the writer of Hebrews 11 said it, these "*put foreign armies to flight . . . of these the world was not worthy.*"