

High Heat

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

(Ephesians 3:20-21)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, **September 9, 2018**
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Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

Today is the 9th day of the 9th month and this is my 9th sermon in Year Two as your senior pastor. Sixty years ago today, the 9th day of the 9th month of 1958, baseball fans in America awoke to a sports page recapping how, the previous day, 9 Pirates had faced 9 Reds through 9 innings. Pittsburgh and Cincinnati had faced off in a game whose progression by 3s lends it a trinitarian quality, 3 by 3 by 3 through 9 innings, each team of 9 with 9 turns on offense and 9 turns on defense.



One player on that very special day duplicated that trinitarian formula, hitting for 9 bases by going 3 x 3 x 3. Hitting for three triples is a rare feat, one unequaled by any other player in Pittsburgh Pirate history. That player's name was Roberto Clemente.

Clemente ended his career in 1972 with exactly 3000 hits. Clemente would die tragically later that same year. Passionate about his missional work, when Managua,

Nicaragua, was hit with a massive earthquake on December 23, he set to work arranging relief flights. Three flights were diverted by corrupt officials of the Somoza government, never reaching the victims. Clemente decided to go on the fourth flight, thinking his presence on the plane would ensure that officials would not divert the flight from reaching those in need. The Douglas DC-7 cargo plane, with a history of mechanical problems and overloaded with supplies, crashed into the Atlantic after take-off from Puerto Rico on New Year's Eve, 1972. After Clemente's tragic death the Hall of Fame waived its rules for how long a player must wait after retirement to be voted into the Hall, so that he could be inducted into the Hall the very next summer, 1973.

We'll pass another significant baseball anniversary in 3 weeks, not one of offensive power, but defensive. October 2 will be the 50th anniversary of the day in 1968 when Bob Gibson walked to



the mound to face the Detroit Tigers in the first game of the World Series. That day found me at Dial Junior High in Pine Bluff, a 14 year old 8th grader. I don't recall any classes that day – not math or science or English or history -- but I do remember my excitement about THE game. I came to school with contraband, a pocket transistor radio slipped into my jacket pocket, sneakily turning it on during 6th period for the 2:30 p.m. first pitch.

As soon as the final bell rang, I bicycled home as fast as I could to turn the television to NBC. By the time I arrived home Gibson was throwing *High Heat*, striking out batter after batter on his way to a 4 – 0 shut-out victory. His 17 strikeouts set a

Series record that bested Sandy Koufax's previous record of 15, a record that stands yet today. By the end of the series (which my Cardinals lost in Game 7) Bob Gibson had not 1 but 7 consecutive World Series complete games, a record stretching back through the 1967 and 1964 World Series and almost certainly unassailable in our time when baseball has become a different game in so many ways. If you'll click on the link below, you'll see the last strike of all 17 strikeouts, with the announcers and crowd increasing in excitement with each strikeout.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YldXACT668g>

Gibson wasn't the only stand-out pitcher in that 68 World Series. In a year dubbed, "*The Year of the Pitcher*," my then-hated and now-beloved Tigers (during my 10 years in Ann Arbor I adopted the Tigers as my team) had Denny McClain and Mickey Lolich on the mound. Those three pitchers set baseball ablaze with *High Heat*. So dominant they were that after 1968 MLB took measures to increase offense, lowering the mound from 15 inches to 10 inches and shrinking the strike zone. Those two rules, giving greater advantage to offense, are known as the *Gibson Rules*, so powerful had been Bob Gibson's *High Heat*.

St. Louis catcher Tim McCarver said, "*Bob Gibson is the luckiest pitcher in baseball. He's always pitching when the other team doesn't score any runs.*" There you have ultimate compliment! The art of misdirection, complimenting one's skill by making it sound like luck, everybody knowing it's anything but luck.

In baseball, throwing "heat" refers to the fastball – not curves, knucklers, or change-ups – just come right at the hitter with the fastest you've got. *High Heat* seeks to blow it by the batter, as if the pitcher is challenging the hitter, "*No mystery! Get ready! Here it comes!*"

Speaking of offense and defense, Roberto Clemente and Bob Gibson faced each other 125 times over their careers. Clemente struck out 32 times, managing only 26 hits. Clemente, a .317

lifetime hitter could only manage a .208 average against Gibson. With those two giants of the game, defense won the day. Bob Gibson won so much that 1969 saw the *Gibson Rules* enacted.

Something else was a brand new idea in 1969, a place called Hot Springs Village, which incorporated on January 21, 1970. Those whose vision created this amazing place possessed a can-do attitude, throwing *High Heat* at every challenge.

This *High Heat* attitude was also part of those who began Christ of the Hills United Methodist Church, officially organizing with 43 charter members on January 3, 1988, this year our 30th anniversary. Christ of the Hills history is one of *High Heat* being thrown by the clergy and laity who came before us, so that it us up to us to continue that standard of excellence.



As today we begin a new school year, our pace picking up from lull of summer, I wanted to challenge you with the theme of *High Heat*. I'm proud for the opportunity to lead Christ of the Hills "on the mound" (so to speak), leading a staff of clergy, program and support professionals, and lay servant leaders, as we seek to throw *High Heat* in the complex "game" of doing church in the 21st century's rapidly changing culture. In so many ways it's simply not the same "game" as it was in the 60s, 70s, and 80s.

Will you throw *High Heat*? Some are being contacted this week about serving in various administrative and ministry areas of the church, and I hope you will prayerfully consider serving in those posts. But we need everyone in this Body of Christ to pitch and hit in both the defensive and offensive strategies of the church, using the gifts of the Spirit that they possess.

Doing" church in the 21st century may have changed, but God's promise hasn't changed. Our *Offense* calls us to go into the world and make disciples and our *Defense* remains solid, Jesus' promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. The apostle Paul knew this and was throwing *High Heat* when he wrote: *Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

To all generations! You know, MLB lineups have changed over these 50 years. In '68 Bob Gibson faced hitters like Dick McAuliffe, Mickey Stanley, Al Kaline, Norm Cash. Those names, unforgettable to Baby Boomer baseball fans like me, are perhaps barely recognizable by today's young people, fans of a different generation.

It's the same with the church. The challenges we face are significantly different. We have to do things differently than in 1968 (or even in 1988 when COH was founded) because defensively speaking the mound is lower, and the strike zone has shrunk. For many reasons it's much more difficult to accomplish church growth goals today than it was in the 1950s – 80s.

The lead-off batter stepping into the box today as a challenge to church growth is the plethora of competition for the traditional Sunday time of worship. In 1968 there was far less weekend travel by families and non-existent were youth sports leagues and other sanctioned extra-curricular activity on Sunday, a day whose Blue Laws guarded as hallowed ground. Even Wednesday night was hallowed ground and forbidden territory for schools to enter.

The hitter in the #2 spot is equally formidable. As Sunday competition increased, so also the competition for financial support, more and more charitable organizations becoming more efficient at raising funds, the offering plate of the church increasingly challenged from the dominance it once had for the charitable giving. They became, frankly, better than the church in showing the public how they are changing lives of individuals. So much of what the church accomplishes in lives is imperceptible. What the church does -- day by day, Sunday by Sunday, hymn by hymn, prayer by prayer -- is can't be put in a 60 second television commercial. It's difficult to show how genuinely and thoroughly lives are impacted and made healthier and spiritually strong, "rooted and grounded in the faith" as Paul said, in a way that leads people to the attitude that "*this is worthy of my financial support.*"

The third hitter steps into the box. In 1969 when the idea of the Village was beginning, families moving into a neighborhood were part of a culture in which an extremely high percentage automatically looked for a church home and, finding that church home, regarded faithfulness as being present whenever the doors were open, or at least 3 times a month. Today we talk about the Nones and Dones, those who do not seek out a faith family and see little value in focusing on the spiritual part of their lives through organized religion. Our denominations struggle to know whether they should be playing offense or defense with respect to the social challenges put forth by a culture coming unmoored from the very traditions which churches have found, throughout their history, in line with biblical understandings of morality and indispensable to their being.

Bottom line, we've lost some of the cultural advantage we had in 1969. Even those connected to the church now regard being faithful to the church as being in worship only 2 or perhaps even 1 time per month, or even rarely worshipping or giving, but simply involved with a fellowship group or missional activity. The strike zone, in other words, has shrunk.

And the clean-up hitter? The temptation of churches to be what we were never called to be. We must know who we are. Hendrix College in Conway is one of the nation's top ranked small Liberal Arts colleges. I recently heard Bill Tsutsui, Hendrix's president, speak about their model for success. It boiled down to, "*We know who we are. We know our identity. We strive for excellence in what we do.*" In other words, "*We know our best pitch, and continue to bring it to every challenge we face. We want to throw High Heat.*" He stressed that Hendrix doesn't seek to follow other models, doesn't need to imitate everything Fayetteville is doing or even UCA across town, to accomplish their mission. They know who they are.

I think, in the same way, any church must arrive at that self-knowledge, discerning God's call for that church and emphasizing their strengths, what they do best, striving for the utmost excellence in the doing of it. Strategic thinking must begin with, "*Who are we, how has God gifted us, and what is God calling us to be in this moment, this place?*"

Remember McCarver's compliment of Bob Gibson? Isn't that a compliment you would like to hear said of you? I know I would. I'd love to hear, "*Sieg Johnson/Sheila Jones/Regina Turner – they are the luckiest pastors in Arkansas, they seem to always be on the mound as pastors just when the church is growing, just when the morale and excitement of the staff and congregation is strong, just when the church's ministries are striving toward excellence.*"

Christ of the Hills is a church throwing *High Heat*, and I'm proud for the opportunity to share in that. I believe we're up to the challenges that will face us in the coming year, but we need you. So, as we enter the new year I say to you what I used to say when I was an American Legion umpire, "*Play Ball!*"