

Reflection: How the Game is Played

9th Sunday after Pentecost August 2, 2009

It's been said that one of the reasons fewer men come to church these days is that women preachers tend to talk about the things that matter to women - family, home, relationships, and so on - and that men have trouble identifying with such sermons. Male preachers, they say, are more likely to talk about hard work, striving to a goal, use fish stories or sports illustrations to get the point across. Personally, I think that's nonsense – a bundle of stereotypes and excuses. But I have to admit, you really are not very likely to hear too many sports stories from me, because I really don't care much for organised sports. But today is an exception to the rule. I saw this story on the Internet, with no name attached, and I thought it went very well with our reading from the book of Ephesians for today. So here it is: a football story.

Imagine that we are TV sportscasters standing on the sidelines of a football game to give the play-by-play.

Scene #1: The team nearest us is standing together, heads bowed in prayer (this is the States, after all), with the coach in the center. Suddenly they give a great cheer, and the coach trots out onto the field - by himself. The players go sit on the bench.

"What's going on?" we ask as we stick a microphone in front of a 250 pound guard. *"What's the coach doing out there?"*

"Oh, he's going to play today."

"All by himself?"

"Sure, why not? He's had a lot more experience and training than the rest of us. We've got a lot of rookies on this team, and we might make mistakes. Anyway, they pay the coach well. We're all here to cheer and support him—and look at the huge crowd that's come to watch him play!"

Bewildered, we watch as the opposing team kicks off. The coach catches the ball. He valiantly charges up-field, but is buried under eleven opposing tacklers. He's carried off half-conscious.... and won't be fit for duty for months.

You think that's ridiculous? But it's surprising how many people still have this image of the church? Many people who are kind-of on the fringes of church life, still expect the minister to do the

preaching, praying, witnessing, and visiting because he's paid to do God's work and he's better trained. But listen to God's Game Plan. According to Ephesians 4:11, 12, Christ has given the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers **"to prepare God's people for works of service."** There's a surprise! God gives leaders to the church, not to do all the work, but to help all of God's people to do it! Whether we're talking about clergy or the lay leaders of a church - the board members and Sunday School co-ordinators and choir leaders - the people are not there simply to pay ministers and applaud a few lay leaders so they'll keep doing God's work. Rather, pastors, evangelists, and teachers are to equip the folk in the pews to be ministers! More and more research has been done that shows that the churches that are the most vital and alive are those in which the members fully claim their role as disciples and witnesses to Jesus Christ.

A clergywoman at her best is meant to be a kind of coach and trainer. My main function is to help you as a Christian discover your spiritual gifts, develop them, and use them to build up the Body of Christ. Every book I've ever read about ministry emphasizes this function of ministry. That's why we clergy-types keep offering Bible studies and special sermon series and Confirmation classes and other learning opportunities: to help you strengthen the gifts and knowledge you already have for ministry. Unfortunately, in many churches, few people avail themselves of those opportunities to grow.

Let's look at Scene #2: The team realizes they've all got to play, so they're on the field in a huddle. They huddle...and huddle...and huddle. The referee calls a penalty for delaying the game and moves the ball back five yards. Still the team huddles, huddles, and huddles. The referee calls penalty after penalty, until finally the ball is moved all the way back to their own goal line.

"Hey coach!" shouts the quarterback to the sidelines. *"This is the greatest huddle I've ever been in. What a group of guys! We have the best fellowship...and some of these guys are amazing students of the play book. Some have memorized over a hundred plays and can analyze them precisely. We learn so much in this huddle!"*

"But why don't you get up on the line and play?"

"Why should we? What we want are bigger and better huddles! Besides, we might get hurt. No one ever got hurt in a huddle!"

Even when many folk in a congregation are involved in programs to nurture spiritual growth, there can still be problems if as congregations we became "holy huddles": bands of saints gathered

Sunday after Sunday, singing, praising, enjoying each other, studying the Bible, learning about God—but never setting out on the line to apply what we learn. The church is supposed to be Christ’s body—his hands, his feet, his voice—by which he carries out his plans in the world. God intends that “through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known”, as the letter to the Ephesians says in the previous chapter.

The church is to be God’s light in a society that has wandered far from the values of faith. The Christian life was never meant to be lived only in church for a couple of hours on Sunday. It’s meant to be lived in the public arena—on the firing line at school, the work-place, and in the neighborhood, seven days a week. Of course, we need worship and training and fellowship with other Christians—a football team needs the huddle. But it’s what happens after the huddle that the game is all about. The purpose of Christian worship and study and prayer is not to simply learn more about Scripture or theology, but to discover where it intersects with our lives - to discern God’s will for us, what it is God wants us to do and be in the world.

Here’s scene 3: the team is in the huddle. They’re listening intently to what the coach has to say. Then the huddle breaks, and three or four players head out onto the field. The rest of the players head for the bleachers. We stop one of the players and ask what’s going on. The player replies: *“We’re not really into what the coach was saying, so we’re going to sit this one out. Those guys will do fine without us.”* The results are predictable. The few players do their utmost, but they haven’t got a hope against a full-team on the opposite side.

God calls forth leaders from the church for a reason, as we heard earlier: to equip the people of God for their ministry. Surely that means that the people of God should actually at least try to follow their leaders! If only a handful of people are willing to give it a try, what happens? In football, likely the coach would get fired for ineffective leadership, and a new coach would get hired. In the church, all too often, the same thing happens. I’ve seen it over and over again: churches that go through a high turnover of lay leaders and clergy without stopping to ask if there might be something else going on here. What is interpreted as a failure of leadership is often, when the situation is looked at carefully, a failure of willingness to follow. Both Jesus and Paul had to deal with it all the time. They had something to share with the people, a gift of Good News from God, but the people didn’t want to hear it. They’d rather sit out the game than get involved. I wonder if that reminds anyone of any churches or church folk they know?

Here's scene #4: the team is back in huddle. They break, and head for the field. But instead of lining up against the opposing squad, they break into groups of two or three, arguing with each other. Soon they start shoving, and two of them actually get into a fight.

"What's wrong now?" we ask, as one of them walks off the field in disgust.

"That bunch of malcontents can't agree on anything," he says. "Those two over there are arguing over the color of the uniforms. A couple of others are quarreling over the right way to kneel in the huddle. Those two guys are arguing because one believes in what he calls "personal" football, and the other believes in "social" football. They can't agree whether the individual or the team is more important. Some of the white players say the blacks should go play on their own field, and some of the black guys don't like the band music. A couple are fighting over whether women should be allowed to play. And I'm quitting because I can pass a lot better than that other guy, and they won't let me be the quarterback."

You might remember from last week that the letter to the Ephesians says that Christ "is our peace...Jesus' purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two [Jew and Gentile], thus making peace...to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (Eph 2:14-16). Christians talk a lot about the peace of Christ. Can the world see that peace in our church relationships?

Within the Body of Christ there is plenty of room for diversity of gifts, but underlying that diversity is unity. "Be completely humble and gentle," writes Paul, "Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all..." (Eph 4:2-6). Isn't it time to show our oneness in truth and love to a watching world? That's what our church's behaviour covenant is about. If you haven't read it, or don't remember it, it's posted on all the bulletin boards. Take a look, and see how well you think we're doing!

So the first half ends. The team drags off to the locker room defeated, demoralized, beaten. But when the second half begins, we see a different team. Suddenly they're playing together with a new spirit. They huddle, slap each other on the back, and take the line. They're off the ball with split-second timing, there is no hesitation, they know where they're going. Each player carries out

his assignment, and soon they score a touchdown, then another, and another. When the game ends, they've won!

Afterwards in the locker room the players are exhausted, cut and bruised, but happy.

"*What happened at halftime to change this team?*", we ask the coach.

"*We were sitting here beaten,*" he says, "*and suddenly a kind of presence seemed to come over us. I started talking to the players, pointing out my mistakes, and theirs, and they started talking. Everyone was honest. Nobody blamed the others. We took a good look at ourselves. Then someone recalled that the Great Coach, the one who invented the game, also wrote the Master Game Plan. Wouldn't it make sense to see what he said?*"

"*We remembered how he literally gave himself to get the game started and to teach that first team everything he knew. So we got out the Game Plan and read about basics, such as each player knowing his place and dedicating himself to it, about pulling together, being willing to sacrifice, knowing the aim of the game, and using the proper equipment he designed.*"

"*Well, we were quiet. It felt as if the Great Coach was with us, as if somehow his Spirit got inside us. Suddenly, we were up! Motivated! Ready to go! We can't take the credit. It goes to Him!*"

[Source unknown](#)

It seems to me that our Christian churches badly need a refreshing encounter with the Great Coach. We need to turn back to our Bibles, turn to God in prayer, seek God's will for ourselves, not alone, but as the people of God; then, strengthened by the Bread of Life, we need to turn outward, to the world to which we are sent by Jesus – we need to get out there and live Christ's love publicly and proudly.

As the church of Christ, we need to stop worrying about perceptions of "whose job it is" and simply do what we are all called to do: to seek God by day and by night; to be open to what God is telling us; to reach out to the people around us; find ways to make other people's lives better; discover each others gifts and celebrate them; build one another up and so build up the church. We do our best to follow the game plan, and we pray for the inspiration of the Spirit to motivate and inspire us, for we can do anything through Christ, who gives us strength. Let the games begin!