

A WHOLE NEW BALLGAME
ROMANS 5:1-11
MARCH 22, 1987

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Batter up! It's spring, and another baseball season is about to begin. Glendon Harris wrote, "Forget football, basketball, and all the other sports artificially regulated by the clock. Only baseball can truly reveal our national character. What ballet is to Russia, what opera is to Italy, baseball is to America." I wonder if California natives can appreciate how baseball gets into the blood of those who were reared in winter country. Minnesota winter is months of snow, blizzards. I remember one winter when I shoveled a path from the parsonage to the church office and the sides of the "tunnel" reached above my head. Winter is below-zero weather, overshoes, gloves, icicles hanging from the roof, shoveling snow, getting stuck in snow banks, slipping on the ice and making 360 degree turns in the middle of the highway (which I once did!).

Winter! What a relief when spring comes! The snow turns to slush, then water; the ground dries; trees turn green; flowers start to bloom; the accumulated cow manure is hauled to the fields--ah, spring!--and baseball begins. The crack of the ball on the bat, the warm sun on the face. I wonder how they can play baseball now in Minneapolis inside a building. No wonder the Twins can't win anymore! Baseball is meant to be played in the sun, with the wind, and sometimes the threat of rain with dark, stormy clouds. What would Giants baseball be without the fog over Candlestick?

In rural Minnesota, in Lake Wobegone country where I'm from, we lived for Sunday afternoon baseball. Every little town supported a team, and Sunday afternoons we would either host a team or travel to a nearby town to play their team. Of course, the Baptists could neither play nor cheer on Sunday afternoons! There are advantages to being Methodist! When we moved to California we stayed with the American League, but transferred our loyalty from the Twins to the Oakland A's.

I remember when the A's won the World Series in 1972. I can still see the picture of left fielder Joe Rudi jumping high in the air to catch the fly ball that ended the World Series. When the A's returned to Oakland after winning the series, Ellie and I bundled up the boys--ages eleven, nine, and five at that time--drove to Fremont and got on BART. It was our first experience on BART, as well as our first experience seeing a world baseball championship team, and what an excursion! We had not counted on the crowd. The street was packed. There was only room for the team and a band to walk down the street. We were jammed in, wondering how we would breathe. And the ride home was horrendous. We joined the thousands trying to get on BART. The train stopped, the door opened, and people pushed and shoved to board. I pushed Jack and Tim ahead, with five-year old Craig behind me, and the door began to shut, with Craig still outside. I panicked, yanked him on board, and we stood, packed in like sardines. Then Craig began to cry, "My shoe came off." Ellie scrambled, searched between ankles, and luckily found the shoe before we exited. Our family still loves baseball! And Craig is our most A's ardent fan, watches or listens to every game, and knows the statistics of the players!

The genius of baseball is that it's a prototype of life. Baseball is even mentioned in the Bible. You thought it was an American invention? Read Genesis 1:1, the first verse of the Bible, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." At any rate, baseball is a parable of life. Glendon Harris wrote,

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Baseball, like the game of life, is keyed to the known and measurable quantities in human potential--how fast a man can run, the speed of the ball he throws, how far he can hit a ball and all that. Then, too,...in an obviously flawed world one can do no more than create conditions that enable people to do the best they can. And it must be recognized that the best is really never very good. The finest hitters in the game are successful one time in three; the good infielder makes an error one game in four; a pitcher who wins twelve games and loses ten finds a place in the starting rotation; and all the daily play is stained with foul balls, wild pitches, dropped flies, and getting caught off base.

One of my favorite poems is "Casey at the Bat," by Ernest Thayer, set in Mudville, which I understand is the original name for Stockton, California. Casey is the hero of the town, the home-run hitter, who got his big chance when the score was 4-6 with two out, two men on base, and Casey walked to the plate.

There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place,
There was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile on Casey's face,
And when responding to the cheers he lightly doffed his hat,
No stranger in the crowd could doubt, 'twas Casey at the bat.
Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt,
Five thousand tongues applauded as he wiped them on his shirt;
(But then!)...
Oh! somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright,
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville--mighty Casey has "Struck Out."

Casey struck out. Errors dominate baseball as errors dominate life. Two recent arrivals in heaven were visiting with each other. One said, "The last thing I remember the doctor was saying, 'Oops.'" Even the President of the United States occasionally strikes out, and makes errors in judgment. President John F. Kennedy once asked Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev, "Do you ever admit a mistake?" "Certainly," replied Krushchev. "In a speech before the Twentieth Party Congress, I admitted all of Stalin's mistakes." It takes a big man or woman to admit mistakes. In baseball, errors are recognized as necessary parts of the game. In baseball the errors are recorded, counted, and held against you. Strike outs are taken off your batting average. Fielding errors are emblazoned on the scoreboard for the world to see!

But, when you become a Christian and decide to live your life in the faith community called the church, it's a whole new ballgame! It's an exciting moment in a baseball game when the losing team rallies to tie the score or get ahead. Then the announcer exclaims, "It's a whole new ballgame." The Christian life is a whole new ballgame. You are not judged by your strikeouts; you are not judged by your errors; you are not judged by your mistakes; but you are justified by faith. In the gospel lesson today, Jesus asked a Samaritan woman if he might have a drink of water from the village well. Jesus was not bound by the customs or the rules of the day. Not only

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did the men of Jesus' day have little to do with women in public, but Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. The Samaritans were the descendants of the northern Kingdom, called Israel, whose capital was Samaria. The Jews were descendants of the southern Kingdom, called Judah, whose capital was Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus, enmity, dissension, and raw prejudice had developed between the two groups. A good Jew had nothing to do with a Samaritan, and certainly a Jewish man would never engage a Samaritan woman in conversation.

Jesus bridged the gap, and judged the woman neither by her nationality, nor by her errors. The woman had had five husbands. She had struck out five times and was working on number six. Jesus introduced her to a whole new ballgame, a ballgame where we are justified by faith and not performance. Paul wrote to the Romans in 5:1, 8, 11, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us...we rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation."

In the Christian life, as in baseball, errors are recognized, admitted and accepted as part of the game. When an error is committed, the game goes on; it is not stalled or stopped. But, contrary to baseball, in the Christian life, the errors are not held against you. You do not stand before God with a box score in hand. Your entry into eternal life, into God's kingdom, is not conditional on getting more hits than strikeouts or put outs, or on making more successful plays than errors. Because of God's grace your errors need not devastate you nor inhibit you, but you can take them in stride as does a good baseball player. You can learn from your errors and try again.

But your worth as a person, your standing before God, your participation in the faith community called the church, is not dependent on how well you do or don't do. Last evening, the San Jose Symphonic Choir and Orchestra, which Leroy directs, gave a superb rendition of Haydn's Four Seasons. Haydn writes delightful, entertaining, even inspiring music; but his Christian theology is weak! He wrote,

Let us find eternal bliss.
Let us earn it, let us find it.
Let our struggle, let our labor
Win for us eternal grace.

I tell you forcefully this morning we do not win eternal grace. I don't know about you, but if I had to earn eternal life, if I had to arise every morning with my worth, my meaning, and my will to face the day, based on how well I did or didn't do, I wouldn't make it. If you are depending on your good life to get you into heaven, forget it. You won't make it. Just compare yourself with Jesus and you will see how far you slip! No, we don't earn eternal grace. The grace of God is a gift. Your salvation is a gift. Your relationship with God is a gift. You are a beautiful, important, significant person not because you deserve to be, but because God made you to be you, and God loves you. You are justified by faith, faith in God's grace, faith in God's love of you. Frederick Buechner says that, "Faith is the direction your feet start to move when you find that you are loved." It's a whole new ballgame!

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In the new ballgame of the Christian life, there are no losers, only winners. In baseball, the parable of life, there are winners and there are losers. In fact, a team becomes a winner only by making the other team a loser. In the Christian life, you are a winner, without making someone else a loser. Because of God's grace, we are all winners.

It's a whole new ballgame when you're a part of the church, the community of faith. In a baseball game, there are two groups of people: the players and the spectators. In the church there are only players. God is the coach, telling us to run for first, go on to steal second, dash to third, and slide into home. You and I are the team. You and I called to do more than go to church. We are called to be the church. We are called to do more than go to the game and sit in the stands. We are called to play the game. We are the team. And the church team, as a good baseball team, helps one another. There are no stars. A pitcher is only as good as the fielding team behind him. As teammates, we help each other win the game of life. We compensate for one another's weaknesses. We support each other, stand up for one another, build each other up, not tear each other down. We rejoice in each other's victories, and not sulk in jealousy. We do not judge one another on the basis of errors or performance, but accept one another as teammates through God's grace.

The Christian life is a whole new ballgame. Batter up!