

“Safe at Home: The Gospel According to Baseball”

All Saints Sunday C (November 3, 2019)

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 25:8; Revelation 7:16-17; 21:4; John 14:2-3; Luke 15:11-24

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>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

Now that the 2019 baseball season has entered the history books, and we face the months-long baseball-less fall and winter, when the weather becomes colder and wetter and clouds blanket the sky until pitchers and catchers report for spring training next year, it seems like a good opportunity to reflect a bit on the national pastime. Two reflections stand out for me, a recent article in *The Atlantic*, and a stand-up comedy routine.

First the article. During the impeachment inquiry two weeks ago, Paul Finkelman wrote a piece for *The Atlantic* about how baseball provides a lesson in civics, because, he says, “[baseball is] a wonderful example of a functioning legal system.”<sup>1</sup> “The entire game [of baseball, he writes,] is regulated by a more elaborate set of rules than any other sport is. ... [I]t requires a highly trained multi-judge panel of umpires to implement and interpret the rules. Every pitch that does not get hit requires a legal ruling: Was it a ball or a strike? Did the batter really swing? Those pitches that are hit must often be called fair or foul. ... [B]aseball [also] has its own constitution: the rule book, and players know that they have to follow the rules, even if they don’t like them. ... [Consider the batter, he writes.] [The] batter stands with a potentially lethal weapon in his hand - a heavy wooden stick. The umpire views a pitch and calls, ‘Strike three.’ The batter sits down. He may argue about the call, but he does not expect the argument to produce any immediate result. The batter knows the umpire will not change the call. He will lose. If the batter started to swing and stopped, and the pitch is ruled a ball, the catcher can appeal the call to the first-base or third-base umpire. But if he loses there, he knows that the rule of law has prevailed, and the call must stand. ... [Contrast this with golf, writes Finkelman]. Except in tournaments, there are no umpires or referees [in golf] ... , [so] it is easy to move a ball, nudge it with your foot, ... or even incorrectly write down your strokes on a scorecard ... .”

Finkelman compares baseball and golf, but the late comedian George Carlin went further, and compared baseball with every other sport, especially football.<sup>2</sup> “Baseball is different from any other sport,” said Carlin, “very different. For instance, in most sports you score points or goals; in baseball you score runs. ... In most sports the team is run by a coach; in baseball the team is run by a manager. ... Baseball,” he says, “is a nineteenth-century pastoral game. Football is a twentieth-century technological struggle. Baseball is played on a diamond, in a park. The baseball park! Football is played on a gridiron, in a stadium, sometimes called Soldier Field or [the Coliseum]. Baseball begins in the spring, the season of new life. Football begins in the fall, when everything’s dying. In football you wear a helmet. In baseball you wear a cap. Football is concerned with downs - what down is it? Baseball is concerned with ups - who’s up? In football you receive a penalty. In baseball you make an error. In football the specialist comes in to kick. In baseball the specialist comes in to relieve

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[https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/how-baseball-teaches-americans-about-law/600454/?utm\\_campaign=the-atlantic&utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_content=edit-promo&utm\\_term=2019-10-23T11%3A59%3A39](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/how-baseball-teaches-americans-about-law/600454/?utm_campaign=the-atlantic&utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_content=edit-promo&utm_term=2019-10-23T11%3A59%3A39)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.baseball-almanac.com/humor7.shtml>; you can watch the routine here:

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

somebody. Football has hitting, clipping, spearing, piling on, personal fouls, late hitting, and unnecessary roughness. Baseball has the sacrifice. Football is played in any kind of weather: rain, snow, sleet, hail, fog... In baseball, if it rains, we don't ... play. Baseball has the seventh inning stretch. Football has the two minute warning. Baseball has no time limit: we don't know when it's gonna end - might have extra innings. Football is rigidly timed, and it will end even if we've got to go to sudden death. ... And finally," says Carlin, "the objectives of the two games are completely different: In football the object is for the quarterback, also known as the field general, to be on target with his aerial assault, riddling the defense by hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy in spite of the blitz, even if he has to use [the] shotgun. With short bullet passes and long bombs, he marches his troops into enemy territory, balancing this aerial assault with a sustained ground attack that punches holes in the forward wall of the enemy's defensive line. In baseball the object is to go home! And to be safe! [To be] safe at home."

More than just a lesson in civics and a contrast to war-like football, maybe this nineteenth century pastoral game has something to teach us about our faith tradition. One theme that emerges after a cover-to-cover read of the Bible is the theme of trying to get home and be safe. In the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve experienced being home. But after eating the forbidden fruit, they were home-less. And almost every Bible story after their "fall" - as it's known in Christian theology - is a riff on the theme of trying to return to Eden, trying to get home. Abraham and Sarah were wanderers to whom God made extraordinary promises about home and safety in a promised land. Jacob, in a dramatic story of reunion with his brother Esau, got a small taste of being safe at home. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, and had to make a new home in a strange land. The people of Israel fled from Egypt toward the hope of a promised homeland. The Hebrew prophets wrote poems and sang songs about homecoming, even using the language of a "second Exodus" to describe the return from exile. The prophet Jeremiah promises over and over that God will "restore" the people, that God will bring them home, that God will "gather" them in safety. The Psalmists sing of God as a "refuge" - a safe home - and as a shepherd, who leads the people to the familiar "still waters" and "green pastures" of home. And Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, "come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

This baseball safe-at-home theme is in each of today's scripture readings. The prophet Isaiah, in today's Old Testament reading, starts a trajectory in scripture of speaking of home as a place where death will be no more, where God will wipe away tears and swallow up shame - an image that gets picked up by later biblical writers. Today's Isaiah reading is part of a longer set of chapters that some have called "the Isaiah Apocalypse" - a set of chapters buried in this 66 chapter book that hope for a tear-less, shame-less future - a future of hope and a safe home when the travails of life - death and pain and loss and suffering - are remade by a God who is capable of new beginnings and resurrections, a God who, as the Book of Revelation says, can "make all things new." The writer of Revelation - we're not sure who this writer was; he cryptically calls himself "John" - the writer of Revelation in one of today's New Testament readings, picks up where Isaiah leaves off and promises a future where "hunger will be no more, and thirst will be no more" and where Christ will be a shepherd, leading people "to springs of live-giving water." It's a place, a home, a safe home, he says, where "God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes," and where "mourning and crying and pain will be no more." It's a place, a home, a *safe* home that Jesus talks about in today's gospel reading from John - a home, a house built by God with many "dwelling places" that

are prepared by Christ, the host, who opens the door and welcomes us in, who sets a table and prepares a feast, who makes a safe bed for rest, and who gathers wood and kindling, and creates a roaring hearth of warmth for those who have traveled a painful, arduous road. There's a reason why we read such texts and reaffirm such safe-at-home promises on All Saints Sunday - a day when we read the names of those who are dear to us who've passed on this year. Home - our tradition calls it "heaven" - home is a place of rest and safety and warmth and peace.

If each of you were asked to picture "home," what might you imagine? What does being "safe at home" look like for you? For me there are two images from my childhood that come to mind. The first is of my childhood "den," as we called it, in our house on Michigan Street. It was a small room with a couch and a recliner. In that den we watched the Yankees every night and the Giants on Sunday afternoons. In that den my brothers and I played "knee football" on the rug, vexing my mother to no end. The den was always warm with a baseboard heater so hot in the winter that it could burn your hand if you touched it. There were quilts and blankets in that room, and our dog would sleep close to the heat. The second image of home that stands out for me was of our "family room" on Spring Street. It had a big hearth, and several pieces of furniture, one was a couch with a broken leg after my brothers and I used it as an end zone for tackle football and as home base to dive onto during family-room baseball games. The family room always seemed to smell of burnt wood or of dinner wafting in from the kitchen. Home for me today tries to replicate these images of safety and warmth in our house in Fall Creek.

What's "home" for you? Not all of us here today have positive images of home. Childhood home for some of us was not a place of safety. It was a place to leave, to get as far away from as possible. Which is why today's story about the prodigal son is so powerful. Who knows why the younger son fled home? Jesus, the story-teller, only gives us scant details. Maybe the younger son was tired of being judged by his older brother. Maybe he felt inadequate. Maybe he was made to feel like a failure. Like one who never quite added up to expectations. So, he left. Ventured out on his own, pockets full of the inheritance that was his by right. And while out on adventures, far from home, he spent wildly, lived extravagantly, experimented and spent it all. So much so that when hard times hit, he went hungry and homeless, craving the food that the pigs were eating. Jesus, I think, was deliberate in emphasizing the pig's food in this story - the pig is the quintessential unclean animal in Judaism. It's a story-telling technique to showcase just how low this Jewish younger son had descended. And it's only when he's hit rock-bottom, descended to the point of servitude, craving pig's food, that the younger son "comes to himself," as Jesus says, and decides that returning home to his longsuffering father is the better option. And so he begins the long trek home, practicing a speech he's prepared along the way, "Father," his speech begins, "... I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." A speech crafted in the depths of shame. Over and over I can imagine him reciting this speech, step after step, as he journeys home, unsure of the reception he'd receive.

In his must-read book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*,<sup>3</sup> Henri Nouwen writes personally about homecoming. Putting himself in the shoes of the prodigal son, Nouwen writes, "Constantly I am tempted to wallow in my own lostness and lose touch with my original goodness, my God-given humanity, my basic blessedness, and thus allow the powers of death

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<sup>3</sup> Henri, J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 50-51.

to take charge. This happens over and over again whenever I say to myself: ‘I am no good. I am useless. I am worthless. I am unlovable. I am a nobody.’ There are always countless events and situations,” says Nouwen, “that I can single out to convince myself and others that my life is just not worth living, that I am only a burden, a problem, a source of conflict, or an exploiter of other people’s time and energy. Many people live with this dark, inner sense of themselves. ... [T]hey let the darkness absorb them so completely that there is no light left to turn toward and return to. ... But when God created [people in Genesis] in [God’s] own image,” says Nouwen, “[God] saw that ‘[they] w[ere] very good,’ and, despite the dark voices, no [one] can ever change that.”

There are no strings attached to God’s love. No amount of striving, working, publishing, successful grant-writing, or diligent face-saving can change God’s fundamental posture toward us. Our failures in life, our shortcomings as parents and partners and teachers and children and friends - our failures, our errors, can’t change God’s fundamental posture. God can’t help *but* to love extravagantly. It’s the same posture as the Father in the story of the prodigal son. The Father who brushed aside his son’s prepared speech, and erased the errors of the past, and ignored his son’s tattered clothes and missing shoe, and sprinted off his porch - the porch where he’d spent night after night in hopeful watching - he sprinted and bear-hugged his hurting child, prepared a feast of celebration, and welcomed him home regardless of what he’d done or left undone in his life. The Father only saw the son as a child who deserved a safe home. Maybe one reason this beautiful story is preserved in scripture is to remind us - to remind the church - that we are to provide such a home, such a welcome for everyone as they journey toward their final home.

Let me close this morning with these words from Henri Nouwen:<sup>4</sup> “[This] is the God I want to believe in,” he writes, “a Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their shoulders. His only desire is to bless.” Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 95-96.