

## **“Rest, Religion and Baseball”**

**Exodus 23: 9-13, Mark 8: 22-26**

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**The House of Hope Presbyterian Church**

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### **Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

House of Hope was built to be a place of welcome to strangers in a strange land.

The scriptural basis for founding this church comes in particular from the book of Exodus. “You shall not oppress the alien in your land.” Resident aliens. Green card carrying aliens. Illegal aliens. You shall not oppress these people, for you were aliens. You were strangers. You know the heart of the alien. This carries the idea Jesus would later promote: love your neighbor as yourself, whether the neighbor comes across the street or across the border.

Then the Bible immediately goes into a passage on the Sabbath. You need to give the alien, the stranger, the illegal time to rest. For you yourselves were aliens. You know what it means to have no time off. You know what it means to be worked to death. Time off is about justice. Everybody gets to relax and taste the fruits of God’s good creation.

It is also about time to worship. Time to reflect and see the world rightly.

My cousin Penelope is a big fan of baseball. I love her dearly. Some years ago she asked if I would officiate for her wedding, at Wrigley Field. “Of course,” I said, but then we found out the Cubs do not allow weddings in the stadium. So in a very brief ceremony outside the gates, in other words before security could come and cart us off, I officiated as Penelope and Bill shared vows under the bronze statue of Harry Carry.

That event made me reflect on the connection between the Bible and baseball. I would like to tell you why it makes sense to talk about baseball in a sermon. Starting with the most famous baseball verse in the Bible -- the book of Genesis chapter 1, verse 1: “In the big inning. “Or later on, among the prophets, the greatest short-stop of all time: Knee-high-miah.

Or how we can proclaim that Easter, as the stone is rolled away from the tomb, is, as in baseball, “Opening Day.”

I would like to tell you about the Biblical basis, but the truth is, the Bible does not say a thing about baseball. But its summertime. And today’s passage reminds us about multiple meanings involved in the Bible bidding all of to relax. Like with the Exodus, we have to practice not being slaves: relax.

That’s really what I’d like you to think about all those passages in the Old and New Testament that make it clear: every 7 days, we need a day of rest.

In Exodus and in Leviticus, the Bible talks about every 7<sup>th</sup> year we need a sabbatical. And every fifty years, we need to take the whole year off.

The Bible is clear: We need to take time off. Time out. Time to relax, regroup, refresh. Baseball offers some metaphors, images and experiences that I think are helpful, and playful, in that regard.

Baseball is different from other sports.

Football and soccer are played on a field, as in a field of battle.

Baseball is played in a park, where you go to rest.

Football, soccer and basketball are played by the clock.

There is a limited amount of time.

Baseball has no clock. You step out of time. You live in an alternative reality.

Let's admit it: sometimes baseball is boring. It's supposed to be. Because sometimes you need to rest.

Baseball is about life: life requires patience.

We need to practice being patient. Time to just look up at the sky. Time to feel the heat of the sun or the cool of the night air. Time to smell the grass. Time to perhaps even live a little dangerously: eat a hot dog.

Baseball is great because it teaches us patience. Your mind wanders. It is meant to. It gives you time to step back and think about things. It takes time to relax. Regroup. Refresh. In some ways, it's kind of like worship. Strength comes from stepping out of time. Here in the sanctuary, the architecture, the windows make it so you step out of time. The anxieties begin to dissipate. The regrets of yesterday are forgotten. The things that have to be done tomorrow are put on the shelf.

Bart Giamatti said of this time: when you are in a baseball park in the middle of the season, it is as if summer will never pass, school will never start, the rain will never come, and the sun will warm the back of your neck forever. Baseball, like worship, is a time to relax, refresh, renew. To practice living in an alternate reality away from the slavery of the everyday.

Then, in the middle of all the relaxation and even boredom, there come these moments of sheer brilliance.

In 1932, Babe Ruth's called shot in the World Series.

In 1956, Don Larsson's World Series perfect game.

In 1988, Orel Hershisser's fifty-nine consecutive scoreless innings.

The 1997 Seattle Mariners home run record of 264. A record not broken until last year by the Yankees, who had 267. A record that, if they keep hitting like they are, the bomb squad from the Minnesota Twins is threatening to blow past with what could be 311 homeruns this season. Moments of pure brilliance.

In those moments, all the half-asleep bored people in the park come together and come alive. Maybe it's not a resurrection moment, but it's like Yogi Berra said: "Love is the most important thing in the world, but baseball is pretty good too."

These moments of pure brilliance are pretty good too. Where people feel unified, they are united, they are one. Baseball and worship have these Kairos moments (God's designated time). They do not last forever. They do not have to. In that Kairos moment, you feel alive, you see something transcendent, and you remember it. There is nothing else like it.

One time, I saw Sammy Sosa hit three home runs in a single game. I can still see the ball flying out toward Waveland Avenue. It's not just that I can still see the ball flying.... I was flying. That's transcendence.

In baseball and worship you practice patience, learning to look for those Kairos moments of transcendence.

Baseball, like worship, is about a team. Because far more than any particular superstar matters, nothing matters without the team. One player may be great pitcher, but a mediocre hitter. One player may not hit all that well, but their glove on first base is like an electro-magnet, snatching the ball out of the air.

The Twins had triple play this week. In fact, they are the only professional team to ever have two triple plays in one game. There is this feeling when you see the team pulling together as if they are functioning as one body, working in harmony.

Baseball, and worship make you think about how important it is to have a team in your life. Those experiences when people come together in harmony and they do something none of them could do alone. Something transcendent happens, we experience it together, and we are one. And we can do something transcendent together.

But at the same time, baseball and worship, are also an experience of the individual standing alone. For every person who has spent all those hours, or years, on the bench, there comes a time, when it is your moment, to step up to the plate. That's a religious moment: when it's your time to take responsibility and nobody else can take your place.

When you step up to the plate. Take a practice swing. You set in your stance, grab the bat, look the pitcher in the eye, and you spit.

The pitcher looks back at you, fingers the ball, nods at the catcher, checks on first, just before he tosses the ball, he turns his head, he spits.

The first baseman spits, the third baseman spits, the coach spits. It's like a water ballet. Garrison Keillor says this is the way baseball players mark their territory. As if to say, "This base is MINE." It's a water ballet of territoriality.

Think about that. In a world full of people who are apathetic, disconnected, who don't care about anything. There is something profoundly fulfilling to see these strong, athletic, grown human beings care so much about this little cloth base, this little piece of property. It's beautiful. What if everybody cared about their part of the world so passionately?

Remember what Jesus did just before he cured the blind man? He takes him out of town, to the park. He looked at the blind man, looked up at heaven, and just before he healed him, Jesus drew back, and SPIT. Rubbed it in the blind man's eyes, Jesus like a baseball player: saying: this outcast is MINE! And the blind man was HEALED!

What if everybody cared that much about all the outcasts and foreigners?

What if everybody took responsibility for their part of the world, maybe you even get spitin' mad about what everybody in town is doing, but that does not stop you. You look at that outcast, and say "This one's mine! It's my turn at the plate!" Then, it's like that old baseball saying goes, Actions speak louder than ....coaches.

The ball comes in, you knock it out of the park. And you start singing with John Fogerty: *Put me in coach, I'm ready to play today*

Or maybe, maybe the bases are loaded, bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup>, it's up to you, and you strike out.

That's the beautiful thing about baseball too. First of all, even the best players strike out 2/3 of the time. Nobody's perfect. But even if they do, there is another turn at bat coming. Baseball, like worship, is about forgiveness.

Like Babe Ruth said: "Every strike brings me closer to the next home run."

Baron Wormser's poem, *In Baseball*, says:

Each action holds a tell-tale trait,  
Each moment convokes an actual fate....  
The whole mix of instinct, confidence and wit  
And strength emerges as a catch or a hit  
Something indicative, legible, quick  
And yet as much mystery as luck

Baseball and worship are about appreciating the mystery.

There are two characters we need to add to our meditation on baseball and worship. First, the umpire. As George Will describes them,

"Umpires are carved from granite and stuffed with microchips.

They are supposed to be dispassionate dispensers of Pure Justice, icy islands of emotionless calculation... dead to human feelings."

There are rules to the game of life. Baseball, and worship, help us to remember it matters that we play life by the rules. Umpires and ministers are supposed to help us remember that.

George Will goes on to say, if umpires are judges, the Commissioner of Baseball is the Pope. For personal reasons, I like that idea. My seminary degree was signed by the man who went from being President of Yale University to become the Commissioner of Baseball. That means, according to George Will, my Seminary degree signed by the Pope.

His name was A. Bartlett Giamatti, President and Professor of Renaissance Poets, including Dante. Can you imagine bringing all Dante's insights and categories -- purgatory, damnation, judgment, consequences, heaven -- to baseball? That is exactly what happened. For Giamatti, as life has to do with playing by the rules, his scholarship made him a perfect judge.

When Pete Rose finally broke Ty Cobb's career record for the most hits ever in a baseball career, it was discovered that Pete was betting heavily before the games, sometimes even thirty minutes beforehand.

A whole lot of people would have said, "Commissioner, just slap him on the hands and look the other way. Pretend it does not matter. After all, he's our hero. And he's popular!"

But A. Bartlett Giamatti recognized that there are rules that guard the integrity of the game. Without playing by the rules, the whole game falls apart. So Giamatti banned Pete Rose from baseball for life. Columnist James Reston wrote an analysis of that situation between Giamatti and Rose. He said, "There was something biblical about the punishment." Like Adam being banished from the garden for eating the forbidden fruit. "But baseball would emerge stronger. It affirmed the principle that no man no matter how exalted, was above the game itself."

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus finds a way to heal this blind man. To do it, he has to take the blind man out of the city. There was something infected about the way people in the city were looking at the world. Jesus had to get the blind man away from their way of thinking. Get some rest. See the world anew.

But then, after he healed him, Jesus would not allow the man to go back into the city. I wonder: was it because they would make him blind again? Sometimes, what people say can convince us that the truth is not true.

What Jesus does it to help us see the truth, and live by the rules of the game of life. Rules that give us integrity. Rules that will make us truly alive.

Jesus did not want the man to go back into the city. Because in the deepest sense of the word, Jesus wanted this man to know, what he wants all of us to know. When he heals us, don't go back to the

past. When in worship or at the game, God gives you a new perspective, don't lose it. Now that you can see anew, in the grace of God, your life is a whole new ball game. Now it's your turn: to step up to the plate, and in the most profound and playful way, hear what God is saying to you: Play ball.

Amen.

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Sources:

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