

“FIRST ANNUAL FOOTBALL SERMON

A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2015

Text: Mark 8:27-38

This season try to think of football as a game which is about **faith**. Not works, but faith.

If football was all about works, then it would just be a contest among people who are all trying to be as good as possible, do the right things as consistently as possible, at least be better than the others, so that in the end they will be judged the very best, and receive a Super Bowl ring—and, ultimately, a place in the hall of fame, to their eternal glory and the dismay of their foes.

If football was about works, then the focus would always be on measuring how good people are at doing what they have to do in order to win the game according to the rules. And it is true that you have to do your best, or you lose. But so long as the game is played and discussed as though it is **only** about works, then there will always be a dark underside. Some players will cheat—we call that hypocrisy, and we’re all guilty of it sometimes. Players and teams will be subject to constant scrutiny and odious comparisons. If football is about who is better and who *does* better, then we will spend all our time measuring and comparing, asking who has better statistics, lifting up the better players and praising them while we put down the worse players and teams and despise them. *If football is about works.* If football is about works, about being best, about results, then—at the end of the season, all sorts of untrue things will be said about the players and the teams. About who is really best. But results can be deceptive. A team may owe its success to bad calls, or the random bounce of the football. *If football is about works.*

But let’s say the game is about faith. Football is then an exercise or a game in which all of us exercise faith—trusting others—and practice being faithful. What matters in football is then not where you stand compared to other teams or other players, but what happens during the game. And what happens during the game that *really and truly* matters, is that people test the trust-worthiness of one another, and act in faith. People are valiant and brave, or they disappoint someone who was looking to them. Attempts sometimes will mean a lot more than results. Which is not true, if you think football is all about the score, if winning is “the only thing.”

I hope to explain this point of view briefly, then connect it to our gospel reading, because I maintain that Jesus is not just “the best player of all time,” the one of whom it was said in last Sunday’s gospel “He has done all things well.” He is not just a player we idolize and want to be like when we grow up, so that we, too, may be remembered reverently by the world as people who made a difference. Jesus is not one to whose statistics future great people will compare theirs. No, Jesus is a trust-worthy Lord who calls us to believe in him and follow him fearlessly into the life ahead of us. Jesus does not then delight in being admired or imitated, but being followed in faith wherever he takes us. So simply to follow is the real “w,” and it may not show up on the scoreboard.

It seems to me that football is truly all about faith. Trust. Confidence. Believing and relying on someone. And this faith which is exercised in a playful way with ephemeral consequences in football stadiums is a lot like the faith (belief, trust) which we place in God, in the most important matters of life and death, meaning and “getting life right.”

For Christians, to “believe” in God is not to understand God, or merely to believe God exists. To believe in God is to **trust** God. To count on God. To live as though our God is true. At issue between us and God is not how much we know about God, but questions like: Will God deliver us—from evil and death? Will God give us good gifts—our daily bread? Can we count on God’s forgiveness, friendship, assistance, blessings? Or will God “let us down”?

Football is similar. In football, the players and the fans are all on the real playing field, and the real issue is whether, in each set of circumstances, on every play, the people around us can be relied on to do what they are there for. The field is a made-up contest in which players try to prove themselves worthy of each other’s trust, and earn the fans’ trust or faith. They try not to disappoint, although, in the end, according to Scripture, even great people will let you down.

Random illustration of how faith is the real issue: In the paper this week, a big question was whether the Colts’ defensive line, full of untested, unproven rookies, can be relied on? Will they let us down? Are we making a mistake, to trust them? Shall we get someone else, someone we are more sure of? Someone we can believe in?

People in other football cities have other issues: Which quarterback can be trusted with the leadership role? Have we chosen the right one? Did we let the right one go? Will this one deliver the goods?

We don’t know what is going to happen once the game starts. That is like life. But we have to make choices and then put the ball in the hands of the ones we have chosen to trust. We hope our confidence is not misplaced. We hope no one disappoints us. Because it is a sad thing, when you put your faith in someone and they let you down.

Luther wrote once that our god is that in which we repose our ultimate faith, in two senses: 1) **to deliver us from all evil**, and 2) **to give us all good things**. When we believe something or someone is able to carry *that* ball, the “ball” being our life, that something, whatever or whoever it is, is our god. For Christians, the true God is the one who made light shine out of darkness, and who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That is the God we look to, ultimately. That is the one on whom we pin our ultimate or eternal hopes. That is the one Peter confessed, in today’s reading.

Now, just as there are two sides to Luther’s definition of a god in his Large Catechism, so there are two sides to football. We exercise our faith in the players to do *two sorts of things*—positive and negative. Deliver *to us* the good things, the blessings, the victory; and protect us from the bad things, the interceptions, the loss. The offense, led by its anointed one, seeks to secure for us the blessing of a championship—the sort of rest, pride, and joy we covet at the end of a season. On the other side of the ball, the defense works to protect us from all the things that could go wrong—a touchdown pass, a long run, a punt returned for touchdown, whatever can go wrong—and many things can go wrong! For the sake of the game, we take turns with the opposing fans. We pretend for the sake of the game that we do not care about them. They are enemies—for the purposes of the game. We all get a good workout of our faith. But what we are actually doing is pretending—we are allowing them to represent all that goes wrong in life.

On offense, the players “look to” each other (another synonym for faith) to provide constant help and support according to a preconceived plan; but also when the plan falls apart the second the ball is hiked. The quarterback looks to the offensive line. The offensive line look to the guys on either side of themselves. Then the quarterback looks to the receiving corps. Or the running back. And everyone is looking to the quarterback, who is like the Messiah they have been waiting for (if you will allow me to extend this metaphor). All of those looks are like prayers of faith. All of them together are “praying” for something good to happen. They don’t ask for much. Sure, they would like to score six points. But they will settle, just as you and I settle in life, for gaining a few yards, getting a first down, enough to keep the ball.

And that’s just on offense. Defense is an exercise of the other side of our faith. The eleven defenders are all praying that nothing bad happens because they fail. The worst would be to let one of the evil foes slip through the lines and run all the way to the bottom line, so that six points get added to the devil’s score. Because, of course, you have to blame someone for your troubles. Or maybe they aren’t thinking of the other team as the Old Evil Foe, but they certainly are not friends or they wouldn’t try to defeat you, which is what trouble does to you.

In today’s reading from Mark, Jesus is finally identified as the one who is anointed to save the world. Peter momentarily tries to call the play and stop Jesus from running his chosen course, but Jesus says no, *this*—the way of the cross—is what we are going to run this time. And he ended up giving his back to those who struck him, and his cheeks to those who pulled out the beard, but he did not turn backward—these are all phrases from our first reading, if you remember—yet was not disgraced. “Where are my opponents?” he asked. “Let them confront me.” And he told his teammates, “All together now. Take up your cross and follow me, and you will not lose. *Your life*. Which is the big thing.”

So he ran his course and was raised from the dead, as you and I know, and proved himself and God trustworthy in the most dire circumstance we can imagine—that our life should be taken away because we were not worthy to live. Therefore we are not “ashamed of him and his words,” we rejoice to belong to him, and we shall never lose, no matter what. Amen.