

Sermon – 3rd Lent
John 4:5-26
March 19, 2017

“1,2,3...4,5 Strikes You’re Out?”

It’s March, and still rather cold. But spring is two days away and spring training is well underway. Soon the crack of the bat will heard again at Miller Park – and by golly “*them Brewers*” are looking pretty good this year! Baseball season is about to begin, and baseball is the ultimate sport of hope. What other major league sport would start playing real games outdoors, in places like my home in Minnesota – about a week after the official end of winter! Baseball revives the winter trodden soul. But does baseball *have* a theology? Well no, it’s just a game. Does baseball *reflect* a certain kind of Christian theology though? Definitely! It’s a sport that isn’t pressed for time, like our Lord, and how refreshing is that these days? Moreover, it’s the only major team sport that assures all participants equal opportunity - 27 outs a side. And it measures its progress by odd designations called “innings”, which sounds a lot like new beginnings – which *is* what the Bible is all about.

Baseball’s inventor - Abner Doubleday was not a theologian – actually he was a general in the Army! But he created a game that has come to exhibit a theological problem, namely, the predicament of trying to measure up to a demanding standard of perfection, and always falling short. The greatest of baseball’s hitters “*succeed*”, only a third of the time – most barely a fourth of the time – and if you were Bob Uecker apparently about a sixth of the time! The best of its pitchers miss their intended target 40% of the time or more each game. New York Yankee’s legend Mickey Mantle once reminisced about his career by recalling that he struck out over 1,700 times. He also recalled that he walked over 1,700 times. That’s 3,400 times up to bat - almost six full seasons without doing what a hitter is supposed to do - hit the ball!

In our text from Romans 5 the Apostle Paul talked about we humans being “powerless” – a sinner, an enemy of God – taking swing after swing at a godly life and missing every time. Paul would go on and talk in Romans 7 about what a burden it was for him to live with standards that were impossible to meet, standards symbolized by what he called “*the Law*.” He said that the Law was forever reminding him of how poorly he was doing.

No other sport besides baseball is as obsessed with measuring the performance of its participants hundredth decimal point no less! Go online and you see statistics on ERA, OBP, walks per nine innings, batting average, slugging percentage, the list goes on and on. A player is not only individually measured, but also compared to members of other teams. How does Ryan Braun hit with runners in scoring position or hit in day versus night games or at home versus on the road compared to other team’s cleanup hitters?! You can find out! No, baseball may not have a creed, but it does have a hymn of day – “*Take Me Out to the Ballgame*” and its closing stanza says it all - “*so its 1-2-3 strikes you’re out at the ol ballgame.*” A pretty good anthem to what the Apostle Paul called “the law” – a standard against which you are measured - impossibly high and which sinners never meet.

Which is why Paul cheered what he called “*a righteousness from God apart from the law*” – Jesus. No, there may not be a theology to baseball but there is to Romans and the gospel of John. Last week from John 3 we heard that “*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life; for God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.*” In baseball it may be 1-2-3 strikes your out – but that isn’t the way the game is played with Jesus.

To a woman with less than stellar statistics in the realm of relationships, Jesus said “*1-2-3-4-5 husbands and you’re still not out – not out of men apparently, but more important not out of hope.* If salvation were left up to statisticians this woman wouldn’t be on anybody’s fantasy baseball team. But salvation is not left up to our performance under the law - it’s left up to Jesus. And Jesus sees in even the worst sinners promising prospects. Jesus sees in lives that have gone foul people who may be the most valuable players on his team – good witnesses to put in the game because they know all too well how hard the game of life can be.

In the mid-1980s, a pitcher came up for the New York Mets named Dwight Gooden. About the same time a singer named Bruce Springsteen wrote a song called “*Glory Days*” about a guy who “*could throw that speedball by you - make you look like a fool boy.*” That was what Dwight Gooden could do to major league hitters. He won 24 games in his first full season, led the league in batters struck out, won the Cy Young award - all before he turned 21. But then a big contract came, and “*night games*” for Dwight started to mean what he did after he left the ballpark and hit midtown Manhattan. Even before his drug addiction became public, Hall of Fame Pitcher Bob Feller was asked to comment on Dwight Gooden’s amazing talent. Feller said: “*Give him a chance to mess up his life, then we’ll see how good he is.*” And Dwight did just like Feller and the Apostle Paul said he’d do - mess up big time. Like the woman at the well – who Jesus came to when she was in the middle of an ‘*0 for 5*’ life – and invited her to take another swing at hers lived as one of his.

Baseball may not have a theology. But some of you recall it once had a “*resident theologian*” of sorts named Yogi Berra. One of his famous sayings about baseball was “*it ain’t over till it’s over.*” Yogi wasn’t thinking Romans 5 or John 4 when he coined that phrase, but he nevertheless nailed the meaning of Christian faith when he did. From the very beginning, in Genesis – the spring training of the human race so to speak, God gave us the chance to swing for the fences, to miss and to make a mess of things. Some of us make little messes. Some of us make bigger messes. Some of us get caught in other people’s messes. From the beginning the law says “*give a sinner a chance to mess up his life, and we’ll find out how good he is – not very.*” But your Lord Jesus Christ says something else - “*when you sinner mess up in life, then you’ll find out how good your God is.*” 1-2-3 strikes you’re out? Not in the ballgame Jesus keeps score in - not when he is the one who makes out the lineup card. With Christ, it’s never over for you. In spring training they say “*hope springs eternal*”. In Jesus we know it does. In his name and under his grace – it’s always a new day, always time to play ball. AMEN