

Stepping Up to the Plate: A Stewardship Sermon

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UU's of Jacksonville

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There are two kinds of people in the world: people who believe in baseball as a metaphor for life and the rest of you. For the latter group, I ask your indulgence because I believe that the best way to communicate the truth of our lives is through stories. And, as Washington Post writer David Von Drehle said, “Baseball appeals to the story lovers and story tellers in us.” From the story of Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in professional sports we learn something not just about sports, but about ourselves as Americans. Other barriers as well. Years ago Mike Mussina, a former Oriole’s pitcher, was asked by a reporter how he would feel about meeting the first gay major leaguer. He answered calmly, “I’m proceeding on the assumption that I already have”

Another reason to indulge my baseball talk is that I believe that the best work we do in religion and life is the work we do out of our passions. And one of my passions is baseball. I come by my passion for baseball the way most people do – through my parents. In addition to being a birthright baseball fan, I married into a family of ardent baseball fans. And then I somehow managed to give birth to a boy-child who is not only a baseball fan, but a serious baseball player. The spring before Danny started kindergarten, he came to me and told me he wanted to sign up for Little League. I swore at his birth that no child of mine would never play organized sports. He was pretty insistent, and when I told him I thought he was too young, that he probably needed to start school first, his response was, “Let’s just call them and find out.” At the age of five, the child became the mother’s teacher. Well, it turns out that if you have passed your 5th birthday, you can play baseball

and so began, for me and Barry, an unexpected part-time vocation that involved sitting on uncomfortable bleachers in all kinds of weather, rooting for teams whose names I cannot even remember; all of them collections of children and youth who have loved baseball as much as the Finkelstein's. It is possible that I have spent more time at baseball games than I have spent in church. But don't tell anybody!

Danny's passion for baseball has been unrelenting. His last year in college he tore his ulnar ligament – the thing that keeps the ends of his pitching elbow connected. He declined to have surgery at the time as it would have meant missing his final season in college. So he played with the torn ligament. He was in a considerable amount of pain much of the time. He could only go an inning or so before it became unbearable. But he pitched well, contributing to his team while doing what he loved. At the end of the season his team-mates voted him the Most Courageous award.

I was both horrified at the idea of my child being in so much pain for the sake of a sport and awed by his determination. The child once again is the teacher. “Is it worth it?” I asked him foolishly. His incredulous, “Of course!” harkens back to this very simple self-understanding. If you are a baseball player, then what you do is play baseball. Even when it is hard or painful. (Those of you who are looking for clues as to what this sermon is actually about might want to hang onto that last thought.)

I myself played the most difficult position in baseball: mother of the pitcher. We are a small sorority, and we suffer agonies that others can only imagine when our children are out there on the mound. When Danny was pitching, I couldn't bear to sit in the stands. I lurked behind the bleachers, peeking out to keep up with the action. I walked away, and watched from a distance, up a hill away from the field where I could agonize in peace. It is from that distance that I took the true measure

of the game; it is from that perspective that I developed my personal ‘baseball as a metaphor for life’ philosophy.

There is a choreography to baseball that is both beautiful and instructive to students of life. First of all (and this is unique to baseball among all sports, I believe) most of the time in baseball nothing happens. This is true of life as well. The meaning of our lives is in the everyday, not in the moments of high drama. Most of our waking time is spent on the mundane and ordinary; that is where we live out our values, demonstrate our character, and approach our ideals.

So what baseball teaches us is to be patient with, and even embrace, the ordinary and slow-paced. There are no sweaty clumps of players jostling and colliding. Everybody has a position – a place to be. They all stand in their places, waiting patiently. The pitcher is on the mound, pacing, fidgeting, talking to himself, scowling. The batter is lounging around home plate, in some proximity to the batter’s box, doing his own fidgety dance. The fielders are all staring in different directions – some at the ground, some at the sky, some with gazes fixed on an invisible horizon. The fans are engaged in various conversations unrelated to the sport at hand.

From a distance, it often looks like nobody is paying any attention at all to the game. But then, as if at some secret signal, it all changes. The pitcher stares in and comes to set, the batter stands in, the fielders lean forward in ready position. The umpire behind the plate crouches down watchfully. And the fans stop chatting and turn back to the field. Somebody throws the ball, somebody tries to hit the ball, somebody tries to catch the ball. And then they all go back to their solitary meditative pursuits until it is time for the next pitch.

Somebody eventually wins. When it is your team, you are deliriously happy. Somebody eventually loses. When it is your team, you are morose for a few

minutes, until you remind yourself that there is always tomorrow, or next week, or next season. In 1918 the Boston Red Sox won the World Series. They didn't win again until 2004. Do you think their fans were discouraged for 86 years? Heck no. One year in the late 90's Barry and I went to a game at Fenway Park and saw a vendor selling t-shirts that said, "Hey, any team can have a bad century!"

"(Baseball) is a very simple game...You throw the ball, you catch the ball, you hit the ball. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, sometimes it rains. Think about that for a while." Famous lines from actor Tim Robbins, playing Nuke LaLoosh in the movie *Bull Durham*.

Doesn't that apply universally? Our jobs, our families, our attempts at justice making and peace-making, our church? Just as in baseball, we all have roles to play, jobs to do. Most of those jobs or roles are small but vitally important to the community. When the time comes, we get into ready position, and we do the best we can in the company of our family, friends, allies, and team-mates. We agonize or celebrate the outcomes, but only for a little while. Always, we are ready for the next game, the next challenge, the next pitch. Because we know that the reward is in the playing, not in the outcome. As in baseball, sometimes we win, sometimes we lose, and sometimes it rains.

Theologian Howard Thurman once said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Now we get to what this sermon is really about! I wanted to talk to you about baseball because it is one of the ways I understand and experience passion. Ministry is another. But I thought it would be unseemly of me to jump up and down here and plead with you to bring your passion back to church just because I, the paid professional, have passion for the church. So what I want to do instead is jump and down and say to you, "Be like my son. He pitched his heart

out in spite of excruciating pain. He did it because he felt a deep loyalty and commitment to his team-mates, which they returned in kind. He did it because he loves the game of baseball; he loves it much too dearly to sit back and simply be a spectator. He has to play the game.”

For many of you, Unitarian Universalism is something you just have to do. Because of your deep loyalty and commitment to your fellow parishioners. Because you love this faith and this congregation too deeply to sit back and simply be a spectator. The Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville can be the place where every one of you figures out what makes you come alive and gives you the nurture and strength you need to go and do it.

This is an invitation from your Transition Minister to step up to the plate. It has been hard here for a while, I know. There have been conflicts, fiscal challenges, all the usual frustrations that go with maintaining a church home. But in spite of all that, there is something here that deserves your passion and commitment. It deserves your best. Even when it is hard. Even when you lose. Even when it rains. Furthermore, it deserves your money! The building, the staff, the programs deserve to be properly capitalized. And you, the player-owners, deserve to have a sense of fiscal stability, a relief from the constant worries about whether there is or will be enough.

Transitions are always hard. It is tempting to hang back to see what happens. But the time for hanging back is over. It is time to step up to the plate. Ted Williams, probably the greatest hitter of all time, once said, “God gets you to the plate, but from then on, you’re on your own.” You may have different understandings of what it was that got you here. But here you are, in this lovely church home, and you are, indeed, on your own.

You have received your mission funding packets asking you to take seriously the Fair Share Contribution Guide. Take that request seriously! Yes, I'm talking to you! As a member of a self-governing, self-sustaining liberal religious institution, it is your responsibility to think of your pledge as a spiritual practice.

Now I would like you to talk to each other for a few minutes about your passion for this congregation. No matter whether you have been here for decades or minutes, something drew you here and invited you in. Turn to somebody other than the person you came in with and talk to each other about your faith in this faith. I will let you know when we are at the halfway point so each of you gets a chance to talk. (90 seconds for each round)

I want to leave you with some profound words from the philosopher: George Carlin. "Baseball & football are the two most popular spectator sports in this country. And as such, it seems they ought to be able to tell us something about ourselves and our values. Baseball is a nineteenth-century pastoral game. Football is a twentieth-century technological struggle. 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 somebody. Football has hitting, clipping, spearing, piling on, personal fouls, late hitting and unnecessary roughness. Baseball has the sacrifice. 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, 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!”