

Sermon: Does God Help Us Hit Homeruns?

Every year with a new confirmation class I like to find out if there are any questions the students have which we could address during our year of study. This year one question is the title of the sermon this morning: Does God help us hit homeruns? When I probed a little bit about the question the students pointed out the fact that various players in pro baseball will make the sign of the cross when they get up to bat or point to the heavens when they hit a home run. I suppose they could just as easily have asked about the religious demonstrations that have been a lightning rod for praise or ridicule in the football season which is ending today, although an article in the New York Time last week warned that in these controversies you have to be careful not to confuse the lightning rod with the lightning. The lightning is the use of victory in sports as a platform for promoting religious belief or even more simply, the relationship of righteousness to success.

The sports issue is certainly not a new question. How many remember the movie Chariots of Fire? The centerpiece of the story is the dilemma of a young Scotsman named Eric Liddell who was an emerging track star in the early 1920s. Liddell was born in China, the son of missionaries, and returned to Scotland to prepare for missionary work himself. But in college competition he came to realize he was a very fast runner. When the opportunity came to compete in national games he questioned if this was a good use of his time, but his parents and advisors told him it would be a wonderful way to bring attention to the cause of Christ. With that in mind he went on to compete, to win, and to set new national records in the 100 and 200 meter races.

Liddell then qualified to represent Great Britain in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. However, there was a glitch. The Olympic committee scheduled the qualifying heats for the 100m dash on a Sunday, and Liddell refused to race on the Sabbath. He remains steadfast in spite of intense pressure put on him by the elder members of the British Olympic committee and instead of running in the 100 meters on Sunday he goes to church and preaches a sermon where he quotes the same words of the prophet Isaiah that we read this morning:

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:28-31, NRSV)

The interesting element in this story that is missing in much of the modern conversation is that Liddell's religious belief actually comes with a price - it costs him something. It's not an add-on, an item of religious flair on top of all the money and glory - for the sake of faithfulness he puts everything else secondary, for the Sabbath belongs to God and he will not run on Sunday even if it means he will not run at all.

In the end, a compromise is reached - Liddell gets to switch places with another runner so instead of the 100m on Sunday he runs the 400m on a different day. It's not really his race, and the odds are against him. How does he do? The story is that American Jackson Scholtz, the New York Thunderbolt, gold medalist in the 200 m, walked up to Liddell before the race and passed a note as they shook hands. Liddell opened it to read a quote from the Bible, first book of Samuel, chapter two, verse 20: the Lord declares: those who honor me I will honor.- and then runs a world record time and wins the gold medal.

Can God help us hit homeruns, score touchdowns, win races? Obviously the answer is yes. Can God help us have a successful business, be a successful parent, husband, wife - be healthy, be happy, be prosperous? Obviously the answer is yes. That is the easy part. The hard part is when we don't hit and don't score and don't win and success, health, happiness and prosperity slip from our grasp. Does this mean we have been abandoned by God? That we are not righteous enough to qualify for God's special attention or that our faith is not great enough to shield us from failure, trouble, and woe?

The part of the story of Eric Liddell that never made it into the movies is that he did return to China as a missionary and he died there after two years in a Japanese internment camp during World War II. By all accounts he remained a very faithful Christian, a truly righteous man to the end, yet he died far from the honor and glory of those Olympic games in Paris in 1924. Did Liddell change? No, he didn't. Did God change? No, God didn't. Same man, same God, different story.

I was talking to the Rabbi about this sermon last week and he told me there is a Jewish expression which derives from words of proverbs and the psalms - charity delivers from death. And there is a famous story, he told me, of a man who lives a very charitable life, albeit a short life. So when the man comes into the presence of God he questions this - why did I not live a long life? why was I not delivered from death? why was my charity not accepted - not effective? At which God points to a beggar on the street near the man's home and says - your charity was effective - but it delivered that poor man, not you, from certain death.

And I couldn't help but think that is exactly the story of Christ on the cross - he is taunted by those who jeer at him: he saved others, let him save himself. Yet "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." (Isaiah 53:4, KJV)

Jesus set his mind not on dreams of success or fears of failure - not on gaining security or avoiding suffering - he set his mind on doing the right thing and being faithful to God. When he observes that God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous he does so in a call to deeper and broader love: But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Does God help us hit homeruns? Yes, but our home is heaven and the true path is faithfulness and there are no guarantees what victories or defeats, crosses or consolations may lie along the way. All we know is that God in Christ has run this same race, and we, following in his way, can trust God to bring us safely home.