

Diamonds in the Rough: The Gospel According to Baseball

I. "Batter Up!"

I Kings 19: 19-21, II Kings 2: 1-15



Dr. Will Cotton
Senior Pastor

The field has been made ready. The players have taken fielding and batting practice. The crowd has assembled. The lineups have been announced. The National Anthem has been sung. But the game doesn't officially begin until we here the ump call out the words you have already heard, "Play Ball." The pitcher throws a few warm up pitches and then the catcher sends the ball "around the horn." The umpire then says, "Batter Up!" And the drama begins. As the batter, you are against that pitcher and eight other fielders in hopes of eventually getting safely home. Your own teammates are shouting words of encouragement. The catcher is behind you saying "you can't hit" and talking about how ugly your momma is. Make no mistake about it. You're the one at the plate.

Our scripture lesson begins with people talking to the apprentice prophet Elisha, telling him that soon his master, Elijah would be taken away. They were reminding Elisha that he was on deck. There is a little stress about being on deck and some anticipation, too. Everything is about potential, what you might be able to do and what impact you might have for your team. Like the batter in the "on deck circle," Elisha is loosening up, anticipating what is to come. For some of us, in our spiritual life, we have been in the on the deck circle for quite some time, in the shadow of a parent, a brother or sister, or friend. If we're not careful, we let them live our spiritual life for us. But you can't stay "on deck" forever. As for Elijah, there comes a time when you have to step up to the plate for yourself.

Once you step to the plate, you are now face to face with your greatest opponent, which is neither the pitcher nor the fielders of the opposing team. This opponent is quite unseen. In Major League Baseball it is common for the ball to come at you at nearly 100 mph from only 60 feet away. A tennis ball comes a good deal faster but it is also a good deal softer. If the baseball hits you (and odds are it eventually will), it's going to hurt and could even end your season or career. To reinforce that, if you are perceived as a threat at the plate or you just tend to stand too close to the plate, the pitcher will oblige you a "brush back" pitch, one that counts on you being smart enough to get out of the way. It is hazardous to be at the plate of most any baseball game. But the more likely opportunity for this opponent to play in is that most of the time the batter does not succeed. He or she grounds out, flies out, fouls out or most embarrassing of all, strikes out. Whether it is the fear of being hit or the fear of striking out, fear is the number one opponent for most people who come to the plate: fear of getting hurt and fear of failure. Isn't that a lot like life?

A great failure of modern day parenting is over-protection of our children from failure. Have you noticed the different reactions of players when they strike out? Some will glare at the umpire, especially if it was a called third strike. It was the ump's fault that they struck out. Often children and youth will tell their parents that the reason for the bad grade in a subject was because the teacher didn't like them or that the teacher was lousy. Parents then go march on the teacher or administration, because their child deserved a better grade. Translated: I, the parent, deserved a better grade. I can't feel like a failure as a parent. One of the harder lessons Tina and I have had to learn in parenting is that we have to allow our boys to fail and even experience life's unfairness. And when our kids fail, it doesn't mean that we have failed. But it's so

much easier to “blame the ump.”

Other players will throw the bat on the ground in angry disgust. That reminds me of the days in biology class when we would see the films about the pecking order. One chicken would dominate the other and the losing chicken would then peck the ground. At least it could say it beat something. Here are the major league batting averages for the 2007 season. They are indeed impressive and these numbers generally don't last into the latter months of the season. But I have included another number beside the averages. FR stands for failure rate, which in every case is dramatically higher than the hitting average. To play baseball is an exercise in managing failure more than it is managing success. Isn't that a lot like life?

When Elijah was taken up, then Elisha steps to home plate at “the batter's box”, or I should say, the Jordan River, and takes some practice swings. He picks up the mantle of the now gone Elijah and asks a powerful question, “Where is the God of Elijah?” It is, of course, an understandable but inappropriate question. The appropriate question and the one that really is at the base of his own fears is, “Where is the God of Elisha?” So Elisha takes the mantle and casts it across the water and the waters split just like they did for the master. Here is a key moment. Is the power in the mantle, in that hairy, smelly old coat? Superstition says yes. Superstition is about wearing crosses for protection and sticking bibles under your pillow for guidance. Faith says the mantle is symbolic and the power is in the Spirit of God in Elisha. The ballplayer may have the uniform, invested in expensive shoes, and broken in the world's best glove, but there's a time when it all depends on the abilities and the spirit of the one at the plate. There is a time when it all depends on your personal walk with God and how God has gifted you. That is the Christian life.

You might think that the rest of Elisha's story is like a fairy tale: “and he lived happily ever after.” But even, by the end of II Kings chapter 2, Elisha is being called names and belittled. Baseball makes its heroes and baseball makes goats of them quickly. And that, too, is a lot like life.

Well it's time for that first pitch. It's the last inning, the bases are loaded, and there are two outs – that moment every baseball lover has rehearsed since he or she can remember. The pitch is harder to see and his delivery is harder to read and you just freeze. And you hear the ump's verdict, Strike 1! You're ready now. The ball is coming slightly slower than the last one, but right into the sweetest part of the strike zone. This one is outahere! You can almost hear the crowd calling your name. You swing perfectly, but just as you swing, the ball dips low and away from the plate, a curve. The ump cries out, “Strike 2.” Why does this game have to be so complicated anyhow? The next pitch comes and it is obviously too high. The ump cries out “Ball,” and you breathe a sigh of relief that you got away with one and that the pitcher is human, too. The next pitch comes very fast and high and tight, just missing your chin. Your helmet even spins as you avoid being hit. Now a new emotion hits you. The pitcher scared you and there is only one thing to do when you're afraid, get angry as perdition. As the next pitch comes you are ready to plant the ball into the outfield, through the pitcher if necessary. He's yours. Your eyes dare the pitcher to throw the heat and he gives you the grin you want. Your muscles are tight and he lets go of a knuckleball, one of the slowest of pitches. You're so far ahead of the pitch you could have swung at it twice. And you hear the dreaded words of the umpire, “Strike 3. You're out.” You have let your team down and you have let yourself down. Some in the crowd are even booing. You're a loser.

And this is where something unbelievable happens. There is one from the dugout who appeals the call. The call on the field is over-ruled. It doesn't make sense, but somehow the rules have been suspended and the last strike has been “crossed out.” What if indeed you play in a game where you could strike out but not be “out?” What if, despite poor play and misjudgment you and your team could still be in the game? Diamonds in the rough know that this is exactly the game they are in. They are not “out,” until God says “you're out,” and he has this way of saying, “you're in.” And the result of that is a whole new set of motivations for playing the game. Survival and fear have been replaced by gratitude, freedom, and love.

Since we play in such a game, I invite you to join me in taking a new approach as you step to the plate from now on. Take the risk and step up fully. Confident in the one who is with you in the dugout and confident of his care and his purpose for your life, “Swing for the fences!” I grew up imitating the swing of Willie Stargell, left-handed with uncharacteristic warm-up (that made forward circles with his bat). And I’ll never forget watching him at Forbes Field sending those tape-measure homeruns not just over the right-field fence, but out of the stadium. There’s nothing like the crack of the bat, when you make solid contact. Maybe we have been living this life with a little too much Christian reserve. Maybe it’s time to play out the power of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of God in real life. And as we do, we trust. We trust. As Paul wrote in the book of Romans, **“In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”** We swing for the fences, all to the glory of God. Amen and Amen.