

IT IS HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME

Salem Presbyterian Church, Salem IN

January 27, 2013

Daniel 3:1-30; Matthew 5:8

Next Sunday is SuperBowl Sunday. Whatever else that means, it means that millions of Americans will be glued to their TV sets, watching the San Francisco '49ers and the Baltimore Ravens duke it out on the gridiron. When the game is over, one team or the other will be declared the winner. Fans will brandish the signs of their victory with slogans claiming "No. 1." It is a win-lose proposition, though the losers and their sympathizers will console themselves with the honor and distinction of "making it this far," of "being a player," of winning enough games to compete in the championship game. Nonetheless, winning is an essential part of the culture. If the game could have no winner, it would not be played. The game recalls the memorable saying of Vince Lombardi, long-time coach of the Green Bay Packers: "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing."

There's another memorable saying in the mythology of sport, however. This one goes back some 85 years, to America's most important and most widely read sportswriter of the 1920s and '30s, Grantland Rice. Rice, a native of Nashville, TN, and a star athlete during his student days at Vanderbilt, often began his columns with a bit of verse. Perhaps his best known lines are these:

"When the One Great Scorer comes to write against your name--

He marks--not that you won or lost--but how you played the game."

[ALUMNUS FOOTBALL]

What matters is "how you played the game." These are fine words for losers, but what about the winners? As long as you win, does anybody care how it's done?

Our Old Testament text this morning is a wonderful and memorable story from the book of Daniel. It was obviously told to regale its audience, as well as to make its points. What probably most impresses us in this story is the miraculous deliverance of the three young men from the fiery furnace. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – or as some of our children have come to know them, Shack, Rack, and Benny – stick to their guns, so to speak, and behold their God saves them from the terrible fire, a fire so hot that the men who had to come close enough to throw them in were turned into "toast." The end result is that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego turn out to be winners in this contest of wills with King Nebuchadnezzar, whose command to bow down and worship his golden idol they had refused. The King, upon seeing that the three young men have been spared by their God, concludes that this is a God he had better worship, also. So he orders them out of the fire, blesses their God, and promotes them to positions of higher authority in the province of Babylon.

There are lots of other stories like this in the Bible, where God's people win the day. But there are also stories in the Bible, and in real life, that do not turn out so well. This past Monday our nation celebrated the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. To be sure, he had an

extraordinary life and he left a great legacy. But his work was far from finished when he was gunned down outside his motel room in Memphis, TN, at the age of 39. He died too soon, when the civil rights struggle still had a long way to go – and, indeed, there is still plenty of evidence of racism in our society today. And while not much is said about it these days, King had also become an ardent critic of the Vietnam war, which he saw was consuming the lives of thousands of young American men (not to mention Vietnamese), men from predominantly poor families, men who were disproportionately black, men for whom the American dream was more of a nightmare than a vision of hope.

As I tried to indicate in my sermon of two weeks ago, things often do not turn out well, even for people of great faith. Some years back journalist Philip Gourevitch brought to light some of the stories of what happened in Rwanda in 1994 after the Hutu-led government encouraged the Hutu majority to murder fellow citizens of the Tutsi minority. One of the stories tells of a Tutsi church pastor who was seeking to provide shelter to others in the midst of the surrounding violence. The church pastor's story is known because of a letter he wrote to his church president, a Hutu, the day before he and his family and those they were sheltering would be killed. In that letter he wrote, "We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families." And so it was.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, in a change of heart and mind, came to be an advocate of the poor and oppressed in El Salvador. One Monday, 33 years ago this March, while celebrating mass in a hospital Chapel in San Salvador he was gunned down by a right-wing death squad, tacitly supported by the government.

Almost every week--sometimes daily--we read about others whose lives are being taken because, out of religious conviction or human compassion, they have put themselves in harm's way.

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is hardly the only story to be told about what happens when governments and people with power decide to do away with those who claim a different allegiance and devotion. People of faith do not always turn out to be winners in the games that people play.

The most important part of the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, it seems to me, comes right after King Nebuchadnezzar calls them on the carpet. The King is not an altogether evil man. He wants to be sure that the reports about these three young men are true. He also wants to give them another chance to obey his command. And besides, these three fellows evidently had some talent, and had already been appointed by the King to serve in authority over the affairs of the province. The King was hardly stupid. He would not have wanted needlessly to waste good men.

The three young men answer the King, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up." In

other words: "Whether we win or lose, whether God delivers us or not, we will not bow down to your idol. Play your hand with punishments and rewards if you must, but the first and foremost rule of our lives is to worship no god but our own." This is the most impressive part of the story. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not about to be compromised in their loyalty and devotion to God. Whether their lives are spared or not, whether their God is even able to deliver them or not, they will worship no other.

So, it's not about winning or losing. It's not about punishments or rewards. It is about being true, loyal, faithful. It is about fulfilling the first and greatest commandment, about giving God our utter and complete devotion, about having no other gods but God.

One could imagine a lot more to say about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as exemplary young men of faith. They are presented here without any character development. Nothing is said about how their faith has been nurtured. There is no commentary on their courage. There is no hint of ambivalence in their response to the king. No explanation is offered regarding the calm, self-assured manner of their refusal to bow down to the golden idol. In real life, people do not come to such a posture of courage, conviction, and calm without some inner struggle against all their needs and desires for self-preservation. In real life, we can imagine that such young men would try to reason with the king, and try to bargain for their lives. They were performing a valuable service to the king in their respective positions of responsibility, after all. There must be a way to satisfy the king that they were loyal subjects without having to betray their God. It is hard to imagine "having no need to present a defense" to the King in this matter of life and death.

But isn't that the point of the story. They have no need to explain or defend themselves. They have no need to try to weasel out of their predicament. They have no need to become defensive, to cry "foul," or to humor the King. They have no need because the only thing they are seeking is to remain true to their God. This is no contest of wills, no demonstration of power, no calling of anyone's bluff. They are not out to embarrass the King, or to deceive him, and they are not out to save their own skins. They have no mixed motives. All that they are doing is seeking to remain true to their God.

In its stark simplicity, the story may not be entirely true to life. Nonetheless, it presents us with this wonderfully vivid and engaging picture of what it would be like to have no other agenda than to be a faithful servant of God.

In one of the beatitudes, Jesus speaks of a similarly singular devotion. He says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." What does it mean to be "pure in heart"? The Danish Christian philosopher, Kierkegaard, wrote a book on the subject. In English it is titled, PURITY OF HEART IS TO WILL ONE THING. The one thing to be willed, according to Kierkegaard, is the Good--with a capital "G". According to Kierkegaard, if it is possible to will one thing, then that one thing must be the Good, because only the Good is one. The Good, of course, is that which is of God. Moreover, if it is possible to will the Good, says Kierkegaard, then whoever wills the Good must be at one with self in willing to renounce all double-mindedness. In other

words, you cannot will the Good and at the same time be willing something else [cf. 68]. So, concludes Kierkegaard, whoever desires the Good for the sake of reward does not will one thing [cf. 69ff.], and whoever wills the Good out of fear of punishment does not will one thing [cf. 79ff.], and whoever wills the Good simply in order to score a victory also does not will one thing [cf. 99ff.].

If this sounds a bit abstract, then consider the following example that Kierkegaard provides:

If a man loves a girl for the sake of her money, who will call him a lover? He does not love the girl, but the money. He is not a lover but a money-seeker. But if a man said, "It is the girl I love and she has money," and he should ask us for our judgment, for we have no particular call to judge, then our answer would be, "It is a difficult matter with this money. Money can have a great influence, one can easily be deceived, and it is very difficult to know oneself." If he were really very intent on this matter he could even wish that the money were not there, just to test his love. For a true lover would say, "The girl has only one fault, she has money."

A little further on, Kierkegaard reflects: "Look at the girl who has money. A false lover can perhaps deceive her, so that it appears as if he loved her, although what he really loves is the money. She may joyfully, perhaps even gratefully, continue to live in the fantasy that she is loved. But no one can deceive the Good, nay, not in all eternity!" [73]

Jesus taught that no one can serve two masters [Matt. 6:24]. The Epistle of James warned against all "double-mindedness" [4:8]. Kierkegaard says that "purity of heart is to will one thing." To put this in terms of our own religious faith and practice, it is not possible to serve God truly if our aim, thereby, is some reward. Not for wealth, or health, not for success or happiness, not for power or prestige. In the ancient world of King Nebuchadnezzar there was a clear propensity to worship the God who had the most "stuff" or the greatest power. That's why the King was so impressed when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego manage to escape the fiery furnace. Their God must be the "Most High God," the One who could out-perform all rivals. So far as the King was concerned, this was the God to side with, because this was the God who could help him secure his power. There was nothing very pure of heart in the King's new-found devotion.

At the end of our story, the King makes a new decree that says, "Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way." The King readily transfers his loyalty to the God of the three young men, not in order to render more faithful service, but as a matter of prudence and expediency – precisely as a way to extend his own imperial power. He wants to remain King. He wants to be on the winning side. And he still seems quite willing to destroy those who disagree.

The pure of heart are those for whom religion is not a means to some self-serving end. The pure of heart are those for whom God is not a winning or losing proposition. The pure of heart are those for whom God is the source and center, the end and goal, the truth and the life and the way.

In this world, there are lots of games that people play seem to want to play. Most of these games have to do with winning and losing. Some people who play these games are roaring successes, others disappointing failures. Those of us in-between tend to measure our own lives by comparison, in relative terms. We pursue all sorts of strategies in order to improve our standing, we read books on the keys to success, we console ourselves that while we have not done as well as some we have fared far better than others. In all our sometimes frenetic and invariably futile efforts to secure our own existence, to prove ourselves worthy, to defend and justify ourselves, we fail to understand the most basic truth about our lives.

In the final analysis, life is not really about any of this. Life is a different sort of game. It is not about getting the better of another. It is not about out-witting, out-running, out-lasting, or overpowering anyone. It is not about winning, and being "No. 1". It is about keeping faith, remaining true, willing one thing. It is about properly relating ourselves and all things to God, in all times and places.

"When the One Great Scorer comes to write against your name--
He marks--not that you won or lost--but how you played the game." AMEN.

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