

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Gary Gumuchian, Pastoral Intern

February 17, 2019

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Luke 6:17-26

Unjust Desserts

Spring Training opened this week. I love baseball. No sport has such a rich history. It has its traditions, which border on the sacred. People can get downright metaphysical about baseball.

I remember being ten, patrolling right field, as all heavy-set kids do, and noticing the field I was playing on had no outfield fence. Given, the perpendicular nature and the infinite length of foul lines with no outfield fence, the field technically extended into forever. Those foul lines extend through streets, yards, oceans, all across the world. Baseball can have you considering more than just the game.

I think this is one of the reasons for the abundance of literature, art, and film regarding baseball. One of my favorite movies is 1988's *Bull Durham* starring Kevin Costner, Susan Sarandon, and Tim Robbins. Maybe you have seen it. It's a howl combining some of the best elements of sports, buddy flicks, and romantic comedies, *Bull Durham* tells the fictional story of the Single A Carolina League Durham Bulls and the ups and downs of being a minor league baseball player.

The film is about relationships. It is about joys and sorrows. There is an air of spirituality to it. The film uses Baseball as a method to explore how to fully live one's life.

Veteran catcher Crash Davis, played by Kevin Costner, has found himself back in the low minor leagues to help develop a young pitching phenom Ebby Calvin "Nuke" LaLoush, played by Tim Robbins.

Crash is a wise veteran who knows he is coming to the end of his professional ball career. He's experienced all the ups and downs a player can experience. He's been to the show, the major leagues. He has spent a lot of time rounding out minor league rosters. He's been traded, he's been released. He knows the harsh reality of the situation. And he's less than thrilled to have gone from triple A back to the bus leagues.

Nuke is a young pitcher. Nuke has a blazing fastball, which sometimes goes over the plate, and other times over the backstop. Nuke is a shallow party boy who is sure he's the greatest pitcher since Koufax. Nuke has a million-dollar arm, but a five-cent head. If Nuke can get some wisdom, he will be able to make it to the show.

Crash and Nuke repeatedly clash as Crash tries to get through to Nuke. In one of the traveling scenes when the players are riding from town to town, "Nuke" wants to know why Crash is riding him so hard.

(Cleaned up language for the pulpit)

Nuke: How come you don't like me?

Crash: Because you don't respect yourself, which is your problem. But you don't respect the game, and that's my problem. You got a gift.

Nuke: I got a what?

Crash: You got a gift. When you were a baby, the Gods reached down and turned your right arm into a thunderbolt. You got a Hall-of-Fame arm, but you're wasting it away.

Nuke: I ain't wasting nothing away. I got a Porsche already; a 911 with a quadrophonic Blaupunkt.

Crash: C'mon, you don't need a quadrophonic Blaupunkt! What you need is a curveball! In the show, everyone can hit heat.

Nuke: Well, how would you know? YOU been in the majors?

Crash: Yeah, I've been in the majors.

Every player on the bus leans in to hear what Crash has to say. He talks about how wonderful the majors are, a promised land, a veritable land of milk and honey. The show is the hopeful destination of each player and coach on the bus.

Nuke is pretty sure he's on his way. In fact, in his mind, he has already made it. Unlike most players in the minors, he's gotten a large signing bonus. He has a Porsche with a quadraphonic Blaupunkt. What more could someone need?

Most of the players on the Durham Bulls are well aware of what they need. They need one more hit a week, another inch of drop on their slider, more pop to go from warning track power to over the fence. They stress it. They worry. They know they lack something, and they hope to get. Once they improve, they can move up to the next level, and the level after that, and then finally to the show. They also know, if they continue to lack a skill or ability, their dreams of being professional ball players will come to an end.

In today's scripture reading, some of the crowd listening to Jesus preaching that day probably felt like the majority of the Durham Bulls. They lacked something to be successful and have coins in their pockets, food in their bellies, and laughter in their lives. Stressed about succeeding. Life can be hard. The world can be hard.

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

A comfort for people living on the edge.

In Jesus day, this meant the Kingdom of God will care for you. What you lack, your deficits, they will be tended to abundantly through God's grace. Do not fear, do not stress, do not worry for God shall make things right and just. Your needs will be attended to. Your spirit and body will ultimately be fed. The source of your sorrow and tears will be remedied, or possibly understood to be of no meaningful consequence and you will laugh.

Some of the crowd who have come to hear Jesus don't share in the worries of the common person. Nuke falls into this category. They, like Nuke, need to focus on the second part of Jesus instruction; they need to be wary.

*But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.*

Jesus is warning those who think they don't need the coming Kingdom. So you think you are all set? You think you have sufficient treasure and food? Your life is so comfortable that all you do is laugh without a worry in the world. Do you really think you are secure? You have a Porsche 911 with a quadraphonic Blaupunkt? That's what you are betting on? That's how you know things are well? That's what you are counting on when the chips are down?

For those in the first group, Jesus provides an instruction in the form of a blessing, "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man." You who actively put your trust in God are going to get some grief. Ridicule, hatred, exclusion is your unjust dessert. But that is okay. You get the bigger picture. You know this world, this life, these circumstances are not the end of the story. There is more to come, and it is wonderful. So wonderful that you will rejoice and leap for joy.

For those whom the woes hit close to home, those whom point to their material success or circumstance, Jesus says, "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

The false prophets attributed material success with God's favor. Those false prophets who appealed to false gods and read false signs and put their hopes in the walls and gates of their cities when armies of Assyria and Babylon came and plundered the wealth of Israel and made a desolation of Jerusalem. Those who were formerly on top were dragged away in chains.

This would happen again to the people of Judea, when the Romans would send their armies to destroy the towns and cities of Judea and carry off many into slavery. For those placing their faith in material goods, and taking prosperity as a sign of divine favor, this might be considered an unjust dessert.

But the Good News is we have a God who does love us and, as I have said before, there is nothing you can do about it. You can refuse that love, God did give us freewill when God created us in God's image. You can refuse the love and ultimately become nothing, like the chaff that blows away. But for those of us trying to follow God's ways and placing our trust in God, our loving God forgives and accepts our shortcomings.

You see, there's a show bigger than Major League Baseball. Bigger and better than any league humanity can imagine. This is the level at which all is the absolute best. The team management takes care of every need a player could have. The game schedule is great, and there is never a conflict.

There's plenty of popcorn, peanuts, and crackerjacks. The clubhouse and concession stands have fresh salads, fruit and the best sandwiches. The desserts are heavenly, with no allergens, and certainly no calories. Injuries are unheard of. There's no bad calls. Everyone plays as much as they want and never at the expense of others. It is usually sunny as it only rains out when the players want to slide on the wet clay of the base paths.

You might think that there are tryouts, or a need to develop skills necessary to be worthy of playing in such a league. Some might think that you have to know the rule book inside and out. Others still may recommend having special training days with certain instructors to have the best shot at making it to this show. There are those who believe showing an interest by attending camps and playing on exclusive club teams might get you to this show. The thing of it is, as long as you are willing to play for the head coach and place your faith in the coach, you get into the league, you get to play. You are on the team.

For sure there is practice, but the goal of practice is not to make the team. You've made it! Rather, it is out of a sense of gratitude because the players love the head coach. Practice is an expression of love for the coach, love for the coach's program, and love for your fellow teammates.

You get to enjoy a dessert you have done nothing to deserve.

All praise to God for unjust desserts.