

The Big Hitters in God's Lineup

Ephesians 4:11-16

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We have been delving into some deep theological waters for the last two weeks, and, since it is June, summertime, I thought it was time to change things up, and look at this important passage in terms of my other favorite topic, baseball!

You probably know by now that I am a big baseball fan, much as Pastor Roy is, and I rarely inflict that on my congregations, but I am making an exception today. You see, I think there are analogies between baseball and the good news, and not just because the local team is climbing out of last place, which is a different kind of good news!

If you can go with me, and have some fun with this idea, there are three principles from this beautiful writing in Ephesians which good baseball fundamentals can help to explain.

Principle #1 - The big hitters in God's lineup are really the laypeople. Does that sound surprising? In all honesty, if we were to do a survey and ask everyone to fill out their ballot of Most Valuable person in God's lineup, many would say the clergy, or the musicians, or the music director or the choir.

That's because we are the most visible on Sunday mornings, and most churches are built so that everyone can see us. And that is great for Sunday morning, and our role is absolutely crucial as leaders, no question.

Our PNC takes that with utmost care and seriousness as they should.

So it is kind of shocking to read in this Pauline letter to the Ephesians as we did, that the real ministry of the church belongs to the laypeople. To all of you. We have all learned that lesson this year with our Zoom team behind the scenes making it all happen!

Paul might say for instance that the job of clergy is for sure to preach the gospel of Jesus, but also in a sense to be a batting coach for everyone else. The Pastor's job is to hand you the bat, see if you need pine tar or batting gloves, help prepare you in any way for your ministry in the world.

Ephesians calls it equipping the saints for ministry. Of course, we know whenever we read that phrase 'saints' it refers to all of us here this morning - every single person on this Zoom who is a follower of Jesus Christ. It's about helping people do the task of ministry for which God has called you into the world.

So, I or pastor Shelby, or one of our Elders or some one other might hand the bat to one of you, or to one of our Deacons or Mission Team member, really to every one of you. And many of our ministries, as you well know, are not inside a church building. They are helping with community groups, helping to settle immigrant families, maybe wearing orange as a support of anti-gun violence, or feeding hungry people or a thousand other ministries, that you step up to the plate for.

Sometimes God looks for someone to be there with a forgiving word, or a challenging, tough word, or an inviting word when it is called for. Sometimes it is quiet and behind the scenes work.

Our core value statement as a church reminds us that we are a congregation committed to both spirit and service

in the name of Jesus Christ, with core values of commitment, community, compassion, hospitality, mission and spiritual growth. A caring community, with love for each other and for a broken world

If the big hitters in God's lineup are the laypeople, then our core values are something that each of us can claim in our own lives, and just as important, we want to be a church where the gifts of laypeople are celebrated, appreciated and supported. A place where we can be spiritually equipped to go in Jesus name to where we are called.

Principle #2 In God's lineup, every player at one time or another is called to sacrifice.

I grew up in Pittsburgh and saw some great teams in the early 1990's (not many since) One player I remember had the coolest nickname. It was Jay Bell, and on those teams he became known as "The Human Sacrifice." Jay became more of a star later, but on those teams he batted second, and would inevitably be bunting or giving himself up to move a runner along, sacrificing his turn at bat and his batting average so someone else could be the hero.

Even if you are one of the big hitters, every now and then you may need to sacrifice for the good of the team. You probably won't make the top ten highlight plays of the week for that, you may not even get a lot of applause or thanks, but your contribution will be just as important as the person who gets the RBI.

So, all of us on God's team will be asked at one time or another to sacrifice. Maybe you sacrifice some of your time on Sunday morning to talk to a brand-new

person in a breakout room, or hopefully in-person soon, and get to know them instead of talking with an old friend. Maybe you are one of those who takes time after church to run some food over to the parking lot. There may be countless ways in which we may be called to sacrifice during the week in whatever we are involved with in ministry.

A couple of years ago, one of my friends in the Interim Ministry group which meets every month felt so strongly about health care that she allowed herself to be arrested by DC police in protest to what she thought was unfair. She spent a night in jail. And I know there are many people of faith willing to sacrifice like that.

But the good news, Ephesians reminds us that when we sacrifice our time, or ourselves, we have a spiritual purpose, some might say a greater purpose even a higher purpose. Even if there are times when we feel resentful at the inconvenience, or maybe no one thanks us, or someone else gets the credit and the highlight, our mission still is to be a committed, caring community of compassion and hospitality. We commit to study and to worship and spiritual growth, to study the word of God and this is how we are equipped to be the big hitters on Gods team, or if we are called on to sacrifice, to do so.

That's why Ephesians says we need spiritual resources.

Principle #3 - You will be part of some of the great home runs in ministry. Even though I grew up in Pittsburgh, I always loved the Senator's Frank Howard, I think I have mentioned that before. If you are too young to remember him, Frank would hit the most massive home runs anyone has ever seen. Later when people would ask Frank, "Hey what was it that made you hit all those home runs? Bad pitching or juiced baseballs, small

parks?" Frank would just roll up his sleeves and point to his biceps. He just had the power.

If you can recall all of that deep theological stuff from the past two weeks, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, the Biblical witness says that about us too - we literally have the power of God's Holy Spirit behind us when we are in ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

One of the great home runs in ministry is when you have cared for someone who was sick or shut in during the past year of lockdown. One of the great home runs in ministry is when we invite our friends to worship, and they end up being part of our community. One of the great home runs in ministry is when we participate in a mission project with other churches to end chronic homelessness, or to outfit an apartment for a refugee family fleeing terror. One of the great home runs is working to end gun violence, and so many more.

So living into our core values is not in the least about being judgmental, or insisting your way is the only way, or hitting someone over the head with your faith. It is all about being equipped for ministry to speak the truth in love, to grow up in every way into Christ.

When God needs a pinch hitter this week in a crucial situation, God's looking for someone to speak the truth, or to reflect the love of Christ, to be molded into something beautiful.

I wouldn't be surprised if sometime soon God calls your name, and hands you the bat, and in that moment, will you answer that call?

One of our favorite expressions, is "God doesn't call the equipped. God equips the called."

Equipping the saints for ministry. You and me.

It's time to grab a bat to Gods' glory! Thanks be to
God. Amen.