

Sermon for July 5, 2020
Preached at Emmanuel Episcopal church, Staunton
by Dr. Richard S. Dietrich
Matthew 11:25-30
“Batter Up!”

Independence Day weekend – what shall it be: baseball, motherhood, or apple pie? Hmmmm. Of those, the least controversial may be. . . baseball.

I don’t think I ever played what could be called “organized sports” (no matter how broad your definition) until I was in High School. The children of today, on the other hand, even my children . . . my older son Christopher, now 40, was barely five when he joined a real team in a real league, the “Bulldogs,” to play a game called tee-ball. It’s related to baseball, in the odd case you didn’t know that. As the Bulldogs played it, remotely related.

As the Bulldogs became the Hot Shots and as baseball gave way to basketball and, later, to soccer, I researched the age-old all-American question: “What’s wrong with organized sports for kids?” (I mean, if I didn’t have it, who really needs it?.)

The answer to “what’s wrong?” didn’t take several seasons and several sports to figure out. What’s wrong with organized sports for kids? Adults! Though that is an answer that must be qualified, because it doesn’t refer to all adults but particularly to adults like Christopher’s father.

Christopher’s father thought, for example, that since tee-ball was related to baseball it ought somehow to resemble baseball; and, if it were going to resemble baseball, Christopher needed to think like a baseball player. From the beginning, he should “keep his eye on the ball,” “keep his head in the game,” at the very least, pay some attention to what was going on. He should hit hard and run hard . . . preferably in the right direction.

Christopher, as I recall, was pretty safe from his father when he was in the dugout, waiting to bat. He sat a pretty good dugout. But get him out even as far as the on-deck circle, and his father must be worrying about how he’s taking his practice swings. Get him up to bat, and his father is remembering – aloud and loudly – all they’ve worked on during the week. And get him on base, and his father has to be restrained from running out on the field and moving him from proper place to proper place at proper speed.

Get him in the field – and it only gets worse. Instead of enjoying the beauty of the sunshine, the warm gentle breezes, or the joy of being outdoors, instead even of praying that the ball is hit somewhere else, Christopher’s father is up and yelling through the fence. “Watch the ball!” And “Watch the ball!” And “Watch the [expletive deleted] ball!”

I know this sounds terrible, but just look at the kid, will you? Now he’s taking his hat off and putting it back on again – sideways – and taking it off and reading the “B” on the front of it for the hundredth time, putting it back on again. He’s got his back to the plate, and he’s playing with the laces on his glove. Thank God, the coach is turning him around so at least he’s facing the right direction. But now he’s talking to the first baseman, babbling about something that has nothing to do with the field, the

game, even the day. They're not even talking about the weather but about . . . Bible School.

Bible School, for heaven's sake! Bible School has its place—I mean, it does—but what does it have to do with tee-ball? “Lord God, what has it to do with tee-ball?”

After the game, the exhausted father asks Christopher if he's had a good time. He's not a complete ogre. And, surprisingly, the answer is “Yes.” Christopher likes tee-ball. It's fun. But how? How could it be fun? How could he have had a good time? How could you, Christopher? You were so awful.

Thank God he can't hear my mind, but he couldn't anyway, because he's going on about something new he's discovered about his hat, or about his glove, or about the first baseman, who's seven years old, even if he doesn't look like it. “His mother said so, though.”

“At that time, Jesus declared, ‘I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes’” or “infants, or “to the child-like,” as another translation has it. The wise and understanding in this instance are the scribes and the Pharisees—and they are the tee-ball fathers—who know just how things ought to be, who have a rule for every case and know just how to apply it. *Every* case . . . as if there could be nothing new under the sun. For the scribes and Pharisees, there is nothing unexpected. Everything is to go according to plan.

But their very wisdom, their understanding, and especially their well-planned plan, prevent them from seeing something new—the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, who's probably not as tall as he ought to be, or who doesn't shave as often as he ought to, and who *never* seems to be able to get the rules right. For the scribes and the Pharisees, for the adults in the room, having proper wisdom and understanding, knowing the rules and the plan, actually interferes, in this case, with . . . the truth.

In the stories that follow our passage for the morning, Jesus violates Sabbath case law twice. In each case, the Pharisees are shocked (shocked!), because in each case (in their mature wisdom) they have failed to see that Jesus is bringing a “new” law. He allows his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath, because . . . they're hungry. After all, Jesus says, his father “desires mercy and not sacrifice.” And he himself heals a man with a withered hand. For “is it not lawful to do good [even] on the Sabbath?”

Apparently not. It's not in the plan.

Who are we in these stories? Are we the wise and understanding? Those that tend to pride themselves on maturity in faith, wisdom and knowledge? Are we, then, the wise and understanding, these unmoved and unmovable Pharisees and scribes . . . the adults, the tee-ball fathers? Or can we still be the babes, the child-like—the tax-collectors and the prostitutes, the ignorant fishermen who foolishly follow this odd Jesus?

Their ignorance, the prostitutes and fishermen's, because it takes the form of a child-like openness, becomes also their salvation. Because of their openness to possibilities outside the law, to the new and the different, they can see. They aren't blinded by the certainty of the scribes, the Pharisees, and too many of *us*. They escape their preconceptions with regard to religion and morality, their fixed ideas about the

way things ought to be. They escape the *prejudices*, that make the scribes and the Pharisees (and us) closed to the possibility that something new and different might be present. God forbid.

Except that the new and different *is* God—in Jesus of Nazareth, who wants to take away all this that weighs us down, all the ways we get in our own ways, all our darn-right-I’m-rights, our preconceptions, our *prejudices*.

Instead: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

To understand how Jesus’ yoke could be easy, it helps to know that the rabbis thought of the Law as a yoke. Jesus, then, can describe his own ministry as one that involves a light burden and an easy yoke, because the commitment he asks isn’t obedience to 632 laws we have elaborated over many years but simply personal allegiance to him.

Forget the ever-multiplying rules about how things should be, he says in effect. Forget all you think you know about God. Don’t be fenced in either by past experience or by what you expect. Instead . . . follow me.

It’s as simple as that. You can’t find the new, if all you can see is the old. You can’t find freedom, if all you know is the law. You can’t find hope for the future, if all you want to know is the past. You won’t discover the wonder that is Jesus the Christ and the unfettered joy to which he wishes to lead you, if all you want to see—or know—is what “ought to be.”

Oh, Pharisees and scribes, do you hear me? Oh, stick-in-the-muds - adults - do you hear me? Oh, Christopher’s father, do you hear me? Whoever has ears, let him hear. Whoever has ears, let her hear. This is the good news of the Gospel. His yoke is easy and his burden is light. Don’t look back. Oh, children, follow.

Amen.