

For Love of the Game

Spring Training Series # 5

1 Corinthians 9: 24-27

03-22-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

Wally Pipp joined the *New York Yankees* in 1915. The first baseman played 11 years with New York and helped the team win 3 straight championships. In addition to solid defensive play, Pipp batted over .300 several years.

Midway through the 1925 season, Pipp took a day off due to a bad headache. Then a bean ball in practice prolonged his absence from the lineup. So a young, unknown kid named **Lou Gehrig** took his place. Pipp never started for the *Yankees* again.

Lou Gehrig became *the Iron Horse* of Major League Baseball, playing 2,130 consecutive games. He had a career batting average of .340 with 493 homeruns. *Columbia Lou* played in thirty-four World Series' games with a .360+ batting average. He still holds the MLB career record of 23 grand slams.

Gehrig played long before the hyperinflation of pro athletes' salaries. At the height of his career in 1938, he made \$39,000. Granted, this was a large amount of money back then; however, it did not begin to explain his consecutive game streak in the face of so many physical challenges.

I. For Love of the Game

Lou Gehrig was a man who played for **love of the game**. His peers spoke of his dedication, devotion, and joy of playing. In the baseball movie, *Field of Dreams*, there is a scene in which "Shoeless Joe Jackson" wistfully says, "*Man, I loved this game . . . I would have played for nothing.*" Children of all ages understand his sentiment; and I think it is safe to say that Lou Gehrig would have echoed the words.

Every child who has ever picked up a bat and ball has daydreamed about making it to the Major Leagues. Out of modesty, I have never shared with you before that I had the chance to play professional baseball. It's true. Only one thing held me back—I wasn't anywhere near good enough! But I loved to play. I think those who never had a chance of making it are amazed that grown men actually get paid to play the game we love.

I know that the *Braves* right fielder, Jeff Francoeur, has struggled at the plate during the past season. But I have enjoyed watching him play since he played center field for the *Rome Braves*. Francoeur is still a young enough to throw caution to the wind in the field. He crashes into walls, dives for balls, and throws laser-beam-fast-balls from deep right to home plate. He has a "love of the game" quality about him that reminds me of boys getting together for a neighborhood game in a backyard. Compare him to some of the more mature, veteran players who often don't even run out a ground ball to first base.

I once heard some excellent advice for young baseball players. If they want to learn how to truly play the game, don't watch the professionals. They tend to get a bit sloppy in their play and don't always put forth total effort. Instead, watch a **college team**. These young athletes still practice the fundamentals correctly. They also play with

reckless abandon. Most NCAA athletes will never play past the college level. They play for love of the game, and they give it their all.

Sometimes inspiration comes from unexpected places. I have pondered this baseball advice in relation to my own spiritual faith. In many ways, clergy are “**professional**” church people. Ordained ministers are set apart for specialized ministry. Worship, Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and missions are part of our job description. We are paid to do the very things that all Christians are called to do. If pastors are not careful, then church work becomes a job rather than a calling.

It’s a constant temptation to plan worship rather than worship; to lead prayer rather than pray; to do sermon preparation rather than practice spiritual devotions; to prepare lessons rather than study the Bible; to chair committees rather than provide leadership; to attend meetings rather than do ministry; to preach sermons rather than practice them.

Then I realized that maybe ministers aren’t so different from church members. There are times when we are all tempted to go through the motions rather than the emotions; to keep the letter of the law rather than the spirit; to do church work rather than be the church. We begin looking for the minimum amount necessary to get by.

There is a world of difference between “ought to,” “have to,” and “get to.” Let’s begin with this morning’s worship service. How did you arrive at church today? Did you come because you “ought to?” Did you come because you “have to?” Or did you come because you “get to?”

During Jesus’ ministry, he often taught his followers through the use of parables. One author defined a parable as “*an earthly story filled with heavenly meaning.*” The Gospels record a number of these tales. ***The Parable of the Prodigal Son*** is one of the most familiar of Jesus’ stories.

You may recall the plot. A father had two sons. One day the younger boy demanded his future inheritance. For reasons unknown, the father agreed to divide his estate. The younger son left home and soon wasted all of his money. In fact, the word “prodigal” literally means “wasteful” and “reckless.” When the boy hit rock bottom, he finally found the courage to return home. His father welcomed him back with open arms and made preparations for a celebratory feast.

The other son had remained dutifully at home, following his father’s commands. When word reached him of his brother’s return, he was less than thrilled. The older brother refused to even enter the home, rejecting his father’s invitation to join the feast.

In a way, the parable serves as a psychological profile. People tend to identify with one of the two brothers. Some are prodigal children who ran away from home before discovering the father’s love. Others are dutiful children who never left home but resent their father’s generosity. Which son in the story reflects your life?

I must confess that I have always been sympathetic with the older boy’s point of view. He had faithfully served his father all those years; but when his faithless brother returned, the entire household celebrated his arrival.

Although the story is traditionally known as *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*, one author suggested a more accurate title might be *The Parable of the Lost Sons*. Plural—because the story is actually about TWO sons that rejected their father’s love. Certainly

the younger boy blatantly rebelled. But the older boy only served out of a begrudging obligation and with no sense of joy or love.

How do we worship? How do we serve? How do we follow God? Out of a sense of obligation or celebration? Do we simply show up late to be counted present? Or do we play “for love of the game?”

What would our spiritual lives, families, church, and community “look” like if we gave them the same amount of time, energy, effort, and attention as we do: travel baseball, college football, ALTA tennis, premier soccer, bass fishing, golf matches, and bridge tournaments? What would our prayer life and knowledge of God’s Word “look” like if we spent as much time on spiritual disciplines as we do on watching TV, reading magazines, surfing the internet, playing video games, and monitoring Face Book?

Don’t hear these words as a finger-shaking rebuke to do the things we “ought” to do and “have” to do. Instead, hear them as an invitation to do the things we “get” to do.

We admire the discipline and sacrifice of athletes who excel in the sports they love. Examples of men like Lou Gehrig inspire us. However, the apostle Paul reminded the church that “*physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*” (1 Timothy 4: 8)

Paul also wrote: “*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.*” (1 Corinthians 9: 24-25)

We play for love of the game. For love of God, for love of neighbor. For love of self.

III. Showing up to Play

On our best days, we play for love of the game. However, Lou Gehrig’s example also reminds us that sometimes just showing up to play is important. What if Wally Pipp hadn’t taken that day off because of headache? Maybe *the Iron Horse* would have never gotten his chance with the *Yankees*. When he did get his chance, he made the most of it.

With all due respect to Gehrig’s many other accomplishment, his record of consecutive games played impresses me the most. He often played in pain. During his streak, he suffered from a broken thumb, broken toe, muscle spasms, and chronic back pain. But he seemed invincible, stoically starting each game despite his injuries.

Sometimes just showing up to play is important—especially in those moments when we don’t feel like it. Our culture places so much emphasis on feelings. We have bought this myth that we can only do something when we feel like it. The opposite is actually true. We accomplish the most in the very moments when we don’t feel like it.

During my early years of ministry, I fought a battle against the temptation of **procrastination**. Especially when you are responsible for structuring your own work, it is easy to put off till tomorrow the things you don’t want to do today. I learned the hard way that waiting until I “felt” like doing something was a sure way of not accomplishing

much. I learned that you act even when you don't feel like acting. You act **ESPECIALLY** when you don't feel like acting.

I had one of those "moments" while preparing the sermon this week. I started on Monday morning at 7:45 working on the rough draft. Four hours later at 11:45 I had rewritten the same three paragraphs repeatedly and couldn't get any traction on the sermon. The office folk can testify to my "frustration." Twenty years ago I would have given up. Today I have learned to keep pressing even when there appears to be no measurable progress. The result is the FINE sermon you're hearing today! :+}

We all hit dry spells when areas of our life that once felt so vital and fulfilling may seem lifeless and frustrating. Here's the secret to success: show up any way.

When we wander through the wilderness of the soul, **prayer** can feel meaningless. We don't feel like praying. Nothing comes to mind. The words spoken are repeated by rote. It feels like our words rise no higher than the ceiling before falling back to earth. We experience no power or presence. Pray any way.

Bible study makes no impact on life. We read the Bible with no comprehension. We cannot connect God's Word to our world. Bibles gather dust in some forgotten corner. Sunday School lessons appear irrelevant to real life. Study the Bible any way.

Church attendance becomes more duty than opportunity. A dozen other activities clamor for our time. We don't like the hymns. The place is filled with hypocrites. Sermons are long, repetitive, and boring. Attend worship any way.

Marriages go through predictable periods of conflict and tension, highs and lows, ups and downs. Some days spouses don't "feel" in love. You don't feel loving or lovable. Treat your spouse in love any way.

Parenthood is 24/7 job with no days off. Regardless of your "baby's" age, you never quit being a parent. Some days the responsibility is overwhelming. Parent your children any way.

Standing beside a **friend** in the good times is easy. Maintaining friendship when times are tough is costly. Even the best of friends can be a jerk. But don't worry—you'll have your chance to be a jerk, too. Act like a friend any way.

A strange thing happens to people who just show up and remain true to their obligations—good things happen. Prayers are answered. Bible study comes alive. The Holy Spirit is encountered in worship. Marriages are revived. Parenthood becomes rewarding again. Friendships are deepened.

Conclusion

Lou Gehrig set a record of consecutive games played in Major League Baseball that lasted until Cal Ripken, Junior surpassed his mark. During his last season, however, Gehrig's stamina and power dropped significantly. His health deteriorated to the point where he finally took himself out of the lineup. Doctors diagnosed him with a rare disease named amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Today **ALS** is better known as *Lou Gehrig's Disease*.

On July 4, 1939, Yankee Stadium hosted *Lou Gehrig Day*. In one of the most memorable moments in baseball history, Gehrig said to the packed stands: "*Today, I*

consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” Later that year he was admitted to the newly opened Hall of Fame. “The Pride of the Yankees” died on June 2, 1941.

As a people of faith, we can learn four lessons from Lou Gehrig today.

- ❖ Play for love of the game. Follow Christ not because you “ought to” or “have to” but because you “get to.” Cultivate a spirit of celebration and not obligation
- ❖ Show up even when you don’t feel like playing. Pray. Study. Worship. Serve. Love. When you feel like it—and especially when you don’t.
- ❖ Be grateful for every day. This IS the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. Consider yourself the most grace-filled person on the face of the earth.
- ❖ And when you or a loved one dies, know that it is not the end but the beginning of a whole new season of life. Live as those prepared to die. Die as those who go forth to live.