

Winning at the game of life: Baseball

Message for Sunday, October 30, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Ephesians 4:15-16 and others

Children's Message:

Proverbs 11:2, New Living Translation:
Pride leads to disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

We have some very talented young people in our congregation! I talked with one last week during a break, and learned that he is an outstanding soccer player. So I'm going to ask him, "I hear you're a pretty good soccer player. Is that true?"

If he answers, "I'm really not that good," then that is a lie. This person is the third highest scorer in the league, a league where most players are older and bigger. That's false humility:

If he answers, "Yes, I'm the best player on our team. The others are a bunch of losers, and I have to do all the work. I love it when I fake out players on other teams and make them look like idiots," then that is pride. Pride is putting others down to make myself look good.

If he answers, "Yes, it is. I try my best, and I want to keep getting better," then that is the truth. It's not being proud. [I know that's what he'll say, because that's exactly what he told me last week.]

[By the way: We also have youth who are a great dancer, singer, musician, and more!]

Message: "Winning at the game of life: Baseball" The date was May 26, 1959. The Pittsburgh Pirates were playing the Milwaukee Braves. The pitcher for the Pirates was Harvey Haddix, whose best year had been in 1953, six years earlier. No one was expecting much from him.

But after nine innings, Harvey Haddix walked off the mound, having thrown a perfect game. 27 batters had come to the plate and not a single one of them had gotten on base. No runs. No hits. No errors. It was a perfect game. Unfortunately for Haddix, the Pirates, his team, hadn't scored a run either. They had 12 hits, but hadn't scored a run. So the game went into the 10th inning. Again for Harvey, three batters up, three batters down. But still the Pirates didn't score. They went into the 11th inning and again, three up, three down. Again the Pirates didn't score. Into the 12th inning, and then

once again—can you believe this!—three batters up, and three batters out. Harvey Haddix had retired 36 batters in a row. No hits, no runs, no errors. A perfect game through 12 innings. But still the Pirates didn't score.

So they played the 13th inning. The Pirates played first, and again they didn't score. In the bottom of the 13th inning, the first batter hit the ball towards third base. It was an easy out, but the third base player fumbled the ball, and the batter reached first base. That ruined the perfect game, but Haddix still had a no-hitter. Unfortunately, two batters later, one guy hit a double, and the runner on first base made it to home plate. Harvey Haddix had just pitched the most incredible game in major league baseball history, and yet he lost.

How did that happen? It happened because baseball is not an individual sport. It's a team sport. Today I'm talking about how life is a team sport. That's why I chose baseball. I didn't choose bowling or golf. Those are fine sports, but you play them as an individual. Life is not like that.

The Bible says that you can't win at the game of life if you decide to do it all by yourself. It's not enough to be a talented, intelligent, and gifted person. You need to work with others.

Ephesians 4:16, New Living Translation:
Under his direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly, as each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

We're part of a body, each part needing the others. Whether that team is at work, or your family, or the church, you help one another. Here are some ways we give that help.

1) Give and receive encouragement

In baseball, the number one form of encouragement that players give to one another is a swift slap on the rear. If you see someone who strikes out, and he comes to the dugout, what does the coach do? He gives him a swift slap to the rear, and says—better luck next time. Unfortunately, this form of encouragement doesn't necessarily translate to other areas of our life. For instance, when I greet you as you leave today, if I gave you a slap on the rear and said, "Have a great week!", I'd probably be looking for another job by Wednesday.

So if that is not how we encourage one another, what is the way? The answer is: through our words. Our words are very powerful. They can tear people down, or they can build people up.

Ephesians 4:29, New Living Translation:

Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

The Bible says that if what you have to say doesn't help the other person, then you are better off just keeping your mouth shut. Now please don't misunderstand me here. This doesn't mean that you'll never have to have that painful conversation with someone about their behaviour. The difference is the goal: you don't say those painful things to *hurt* the other person, but to *help* them.

This week, I want to challenge you to be an encourager. Be intentional about it. Think before you speak: "Is this going to be helpful to that person? If not, then why am I saying it?"

Romans 1:12, New Living Translation:

I'm eager to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours. In this way, each of us will be a blessing to the other.

Let's practise that right now. Turn to someone near you and say to them, "God made you, and you are amazing." Do more of that this week.

2) Give and receive comfort

Comfort is different than encouragement. To encourage is to motivate and to lift up someone, sometimes even to challenge someone. There are times in our lives when we have lost, when we have been defeated, when we are in mourning. Yes, we will need encouragement; but what we need first is comfort. Comfort is knowing that you're not alone; that when your own strength is not enough, you can lean on someone else.

Men tend to not be the greatest comforters. That's because we like to fix things. Instead of just listening to someone's pain, men are more likely to jump in and say, "Have you tried doing this?" We're trying to help, but right at that moment, that's not very helpful.

2 Corinthians 1:4, New Living Translation:

[God] comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

And how does God comfort you? Primarily by sending people: people who will listen, people who will try to understand, people who won't judge but who will just love. Then you in turn can be a comfort to someone else.

Here's the number one thing you need to know to be a good comforter: listen. Don't give advice, don't tell of your relative who had the same problem, don't explain what God is doing. Just be quiet and listen.

Nelson Searcy tells of a theology professor he had in seminary. This professor and his wife had one daughter, twelve years old.

One day, his daughter of 12 was walking home from school with a friend. And they were walking along the sidewalk, and a drunk driver came by and swerved onto the sidewalk and in order to avoid the car, his daughter and her friend jumped off of the sidewalk and the car missed them. The friend was okay, but the daughter fell into a 12' deep crevice that was there for construction on the road. She hit her head and was knocked unconscious at the bottom of this hole. The friend who saw it, did the right thing. She couldn't get down there, so she went and got someone to help her.

But what she didn't know is that when the 12 year old had hit her head, she fell down face first into three inches of water and she ended up drowning in the bottom of that hole, three inches of water.

If you can imagine for a father, for a mother, this was hard to deal with, knowing that if someone had just been there, the injury to her head wasn't significant, it just knocked her unconscious. If someone had been there to roll her over, she would still be alive. Can you imagine dealing with that grief?

This theology professor, many of his friends were theologians and Bible experts, and they would come in and told him all of God's purpose in this and what God says about this, and what the Bible says about this, and so on. It

just made him angrier, and angrier. Then one day, a friend of his came into his office without saying a word and just sat down across the desk from him. They sat there in silence for over 30 minutes. Then the friend got up, walked over, and squeezed him on the shoulder and walked out. The professor said, that was the day the healing process began. That was the day that he first felt comforted.

When God gives you the opportunity to comfort someone who is hurting, spend most of your time listening and not talking. You don't have to have all the answers (in fact, the people who have the answers are the worst kind). You don't have to have clever insights or ideas. Any of us can make the difference in the life of someone who is hurting, by being a good listener.

3) Give and receive correction

A good teammate encourages and comforts, but a good teammate also corrects mistakes. For instance, if you are on a baseball team, and keep making the same error over and over and over again, your teammates and the coach don't say, "I'm not going to say anything because I'm afraid I might hurt his feelings." No, they talk with you about what's going wrong. Why? Because every time you make that mistake, you hurt yourself and you hurt the team.

It's the same way in life. A good teammate doesn't allow friends to keep making mistakes that hurt themselves and the people around them. You at least try to help them.

We are familiar with how forgiving and how loving Jesus is. We imagine Jesus is the perfect encourager, the perfect comforter, and he is. But we forget that Jesus also always lovingly corrected those whom he saw making a mistake.

One example of this is in John 8. Some of the religious leaders who are against Jesus are trying to get him in trouble. They bring to him a woman caught in the act of adultery. The Jewish Law is very clear on this: she must be killed, and they had stones in their hands, ready to do the job. They picture Jesus as a softie, a liberal, and this is the perfect setup. So they ask Jesus, "What do you say?"

You may be familiar with Jesus' famous response: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." One by one, they dropped their stones and walked away. But what happens next is also important.

John 8:10-11, New International Version:

Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared.

"Go now and leave your life of sin."

Jesus accepted her, he forgave her, he loved her. But he also made it clear: what you're doing is wrong. You're hurting yourself, and you're hurting others. You need to change that.

Jesus tells us to do the same in our relationships:

Luke 17:3, The Message:

"Be alert. If you see your friend going wrong, correct him. If he responds, forgive him."

But how? How do you respond when someone you value is doing harm to themselves and others? Let's say this person has an addiction, or is in an abusive relationship. What do you do or say?

The godly approach is to speak the truth in love.

Ephesians 4:15-16, New Century Version:

Speaking the truth with love, we will grow up in every way into Christ, who is the head. The whole body depends on Christ, and all the parts of the body are joined and held together. Each part does its own work to make the whole body grow and be strong with love.

You don't pretend everything is alright. That's a lie. You meet with the person, and lovingly point out the truth. And then, because you're on the same team, you help the person to make the change, to achieve the goal. Having this conversation is not easy. It's awkward, even painful. But so is surgery, and sometimes it's necessary.

One obvious note: none of us is perfect. We all need correction from time to time. If we're going to be good teammates, then it's important that we are humble enough to also receive correction.

Be a team player. Help those around you, and be humble enough to receive their help when you need it.

Next Steps:

- Be thankful God has given you other people with whom to share life: friends, family, the church family.
- Be thoughtful: “How can I be a blessing to _____ ? Pray for wisdom.
- Then do it.