

Sermon: "A Sermon on the Mound "
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Readings From "America and the Church of Baseball" by Carl T. Hall

Ya gotta believe: Baseball is like a religion with its own pantheon of deities and holy traditions, filling a unique role in American society that goes way beyond mere national pastime....

For 40 years, sociologists and religious scholars have been calling baseball one of America's great "civil religions," a secular affair that is a grubby business of entertainment, but also exists on a plane of pure faith, powered by rituals and lore and immortal records.

"People are incurably religious," said William Herzog II, a New Testament scholar at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in Rochester, N.Y. "We have to have some form of religion, and for some people it's baseball. It's only a game, but it has elements that point beyond."....

Sometimes the traditions are oppressive, of course, which is why the major leagues were a white-people-only club until Jackie Robinson signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1946. The fan base and much of the game's management hierarchy are still not exactly models of enlightenment, on any scorecard...

Flaws can be found in all the religious institutions, too, but they do nothing to shake faith of the true believers. Struggles against baseball's entrenched hypocrisy reinforce the game's mythic role, ... opening a window on America's own hypocrisy.

"Baseball has always symbolized so many dimensions of American national unity, and whether that unity is real or just an illusion is really beside the point."
[Christopher Evans said.]

"It has symbolized what is sacred about America – fairness, equality, American justice.... Jackie Robinson becomes more than just an African American integrating a sport. This was baseball. He was making baseball live up to what it was supposed to be in the first place – in some mythological way, defining what it means to be American."

"Analysis of Baseball" by May Swenson

It's about
the ball,
the bat,
and the mitt.

Ball hits
bat, or it
hits mitt.
Ball doesn't
hit ball, bat
meets it.
Ball bounces
off bat, flies
air, or thuds
ground (dud)
or it
fits mitt.

Bat waits
for ball
to mate.
Ball hates
to take bat's
bait. Ball
flirts, bat's
late, don't
keep the date.
Ball goes in
(thwack) to mitt,
and goes out
(thwack) back
to mitt.

Ball fits
mitt, but
not all
the time.
Sometimes
ball gets hit
(pow) when bat
meets it,
and sails
to a place
where mitt
has to quit
in disgrace.
That's about
the bases
loaded,
about 40,000
fans exploded.

It's about
the ball,
the bat,
the mitt,
the bases
and the fans.

It's done
on a diamond,
and for fun.
It's about
home, and it's
about run.

Sermon "A Sermon on the Mound"

When Carrie Rice called with her service auction sermon theme for this year, she announced, "I have one word for you – baseball!" Now, my two baseball-obsessed sons were thrilled, but some of you might well ask, why baseball? Carrie offers this explanation: "Baseball is special to me, in a way, because it's the only sport I vaguely understand. We were not sports fans in my house growing up, but when I met Dave in college, I found I had fallen in love with an avid sports follower. Not a fan – there's a difference. Anyway, we spent many evening snuggled up on the couch watching baseball. I will still occasionally watch, but what's surprising to me is that David has passed his passion for the game on to his daughter. Callie loves baseball. They talk players and stats together. She was avidly interested in the recent doping scandal. The World Series is now a can't-miss event in our house. I'd like to hear your perspective on the game – what makes it so American? What does it mean to your family? What's good/bad about it? Any Unitarian Universalists ever play baseball? Who's your favorite player? Do you consider yourself a fan? What does it mean to be a fan? Can UU's, who seem to pride themselves on being 'non-joiners', truly be fans?"

Where to begin? Thirteen years ago, my first ministry was with the Community Church of New York in the center of Manhattan. On many a warm summer afternoon, Wayne and I hopped on the subway after church to Yankee Stadium to catch a ballgame. I, too, discovered that I had fallen in love with a sports fan, at least one dedicated enough to faithfully record every play on his scorecard. I would always panic whenever Wayne went off for a short time and I was left holding the card. What if I filled it out wrong? What if I couldn't tell if it was the shortstop or second baseman who had made the catch? Luckily, I could usually find several baseball obsessed fans sitting nearby, who were willing to help a damsel in distress. That fall, I moved to Michigan to begin my call with the Unitarian Universalist Church of Flint, but still found myself following those Yankees. The Sunday after they clinched the 1996 World Series, four singers from the choir came up during joys and sorrows and serenaded me with "New York, New York."

But it wasn't until my sons were born that I really had the opportunity to contemplate my destiny with America's favorite past time. Sam, my youngest, was born with a love for anything round that could be thrown high through the air. It didn't take long for all of us to be drawn into the game. His older brother Ben summed it up one day, when he announced: "All Sam wants to do is play baseball. If I want to play with Sam, I guess I'll have to play, too." Sam is named after my paternal grandfather, Samuel Friedman, who died when I was in high school. Although they will never meet in this life, I find it fascinating that my Grandpa Sam was a huge baseball fan, too. Growing up in Brooklyn, dedicated to the Brooklyn Dodgers as all my grandparents were, my

grandpa played baseball in fields, streets, and alleys. He was fond of telling me the story of his very first date with a girl, which went awry. He was dressed up in his best white collared shirt with his hair impeccably combed. But on the way to their meeting place, he realized he was running early. He saw a group of boys playing ball and decided to join in. By the time he met up with his date, he was a ruffled, dirty mess. His date was not amused. My grandfather never regretted his decision. Obviously, she wasn't the girl for him.

I think of my grandfather often, as I watch my boys immerse themselves in the game. There is no off-season in my house. Day in and day out, games are reenacted in my front yard, my backyard, local parks and, in bad weather, my living room. Every spring we are the front-row fans at Wayne's slo' pitch softball games, rain or shine. Sam is a loyal Twins fan, while Ben likes to relive the very first World Series game between the Boston Americans and Pittsburgh Pirates in 1903. Ben has discovered the delights of such websites baseballreference.com and the baseball almanac. We may not own a TV, but we are nonetheless subscribed to MLB.com game video archive. And recently, through the internet, they were delighted to discover that there are baseball leagues in China and Japan, whose seasons they can follow. Now, like you, Carrie, I like baseball. I even at times understand it (though at other times I'm a pretty decent Amelia Bedelia). But I recognize something quite different in my sons' passion for the game. Call it a love, an obsession, a calling, a way of life, or something else - it is the lens through which they see the world, the play-by-play which helps them begin to understand our universal human struggles and triumphs. For them, baseball represents the great human story, worth telling over and over again.

Why is baseball so quintessentially American? It was the poet, Walt Whitman, who once praised baseball as a path for getting America out of their houses and their stifling routines: "I see great things in baseball, It will take our people out-of-doors, fill them with oxygen, give them a larger physical stoicism, tend to relieve us from being a nervous, dyspeptic set, repair those losses and be a blessing to us." Others have argued that baseball is a game dedicated to democracy. Witness the fact that there is no one body type that qualifies you or disqualifies you for the game. There is the story of Jackie Robinson, the first African-American player to integrate then all-white major leagues. There are the experiences of the many women who filled the professional baseball teams while their husbands were abroad serving in World War II. Even now, to watch baseball is to see the many faces of America and the world, all ethnicities, nationalities, sizes, shapes, styles and skills.

My sons understand that in the great democracy of baseball, everyone has their chance at a moment of glory. Earlier this year, on the night of the Minnesota Caucus, I was trying to explain to Ben and Sam why it was important that Wayne and I take the

time to vote. It could be a historic election, where we might elect the first African American man or the first woman to the White House. They looked at me blankly – how could that be so important? Thinking quickly, I went on, “Well, you know how Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball? Barack Obama might break the color barrier to the White House.” Suddenly they were nodding in understanding. Benjamin piped in, “Then Hillary Clinton might break the woman-barrier!” And so, baseball can indeed be a metaphor for our times!

But I think there is something more about baseball that captures the hearts of its fans, especially its Unitarian Universalist fanatics. And, never fear, they do exist! Early in my theological training, I discovered the small society of about 50 UU ministers, who span every age, gender, theology, team loyalty, and much more, who dedicate themselves to the love of baseball. At our Annual General Assembly each June, they can faithfully be found playing hooky at the nearby ball park. They preach annual baseball sermons and publish fervent prayers. For several years, they had their own periodic journal dedicated to “communicate, share, and promote the spirituality of baseball in all its forms.” Nor are they alone – their congregations mourn and rejoice with them, and each year many of our congregations organize bus pilgrimages to their home teams and fill co-ed softball and baseball leagues.

As a denomination, we cannot claim a deeper connection to the game than most. I could glean no specific statistics about how many UU’s have stood on the pitcher’s mound, or crossed home plate through the years. One small claim to fame can be found in the fact that it was President William Howard Taft, a Unitarian, who started the tradition of the presidential first pitch at the April 14, 1910 game of the Washington Senators and Philadelphia Athletics. As legend goes, Taft was at the game, when the umpire offered him the ball and suggested he throw it over home plate. So began a tradition which has continued with every president, except for Jimmy Carter.

While one might be tempted to think that the rebellious, skeptical spirit of Unitarian Universalists would make us unlikely fans of anything, as far as baseball goes, I think the opposite is true. Indeed, I believe that it is exactly *because* of our distrust of dogma and *because* of our faith in the individual strength of the human spirit that baseball captures our devotion. Let me share with you three brief examples of liberal baseball theology, which may shed some insight into our UU passion for the game.

First and foremost, Unitarian Universalists believe in the redoubtable human spirit! Take these words from Francis T. Vincent Jr., who was Commissioner of Baseball in 1991: “Baseball teaches us, or has taught most of us, how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we

have failed, we hold in high regard those who have failed less often -- those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players. I also find it fascinating that baseball, alone in sport, considers errors to be a part of the game, part of its rigorous truth." Now, I actually first read this quote on a website about baseball and religion, where the blogger saw the acceptance of our inescapable errors as a reminder of the need for compassion and forgiveness as we grow through our trials and pains. While this can be true, I also think the Commissioner's words lead to another spiritual insight: because of our human fallibility, we might strike out more often than we would chose, but each and every at bat is a clean slate, a new count, and the strike-outs of yesterday do not diminish the possible home runs of today. Baseball is not about fate alone, but rather is about the grace of new chances and the strength we are given to meet those chances, again and again.

Secondly, Unitarian Universalists believe in the power of faith! It has been noted that two of the most popular teams of choice for Unitarian Universalists are the Chicago Cubs (who have not won the World Series since 1908) and the Boston Red Sox (who until 2004 had been under the curse of the Bambino since 1918). Perhaps we are just masochists. Perhaps we have a soft spot in our hearts for the underdog. Or perhaps, just perhaps, we natural religionists understand something of the spiritual cycle of heartbreak and hope. In his book, *The Green Fields of the Mind*, A. Bartlett Giamatti observes: "It breaks your heart. It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring when everything else begins again, and it blossoms into summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone." And yet, every season ends with the promise of another Opening Day. Our faith is in the process, the cycle, the seasons of living – and in the eternal hope for tomorrow.

Last, but not least, Unitarian Universalists believe in the meaning of the journey for its own sake. As I was speaking with the rev. charlie kast, editor of the *Baseball Spiritual UU Intensive journal*, he explained to me his own personal view of baseball spirituality. For him, the classic story in Western literature is Homer's *Odyssey*, the epic tale of the hero Odysseus as he sets off to war, wanders through many trials and travails, and at long last finds his way home. For him, baseball reminds us of that epic nature of our lives. The day comes when each of us leaves home. Along the way people try to stop us or help us get where we want to go. Sometimes we get lost or stranded for a time. But eventually, somehow, in our own unique ways, through our own talents and connections with others, we find our way home.

By these measures, baseball may indeed have something to teach us about the journey of the soul. Still, it may comfort you to know that scholars, such as Lisle Dalton, a professor of religious studies at Hartwick Collage, 30 miles from the Baseball Hall of

fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. have decisively concluded that, despite popular belief, "Baseball is not a religion." John Savant, a retired English professor, has noted that mega-heroes such as Barry Bonds and Sammy Sosa may be gods of a sort, but they are "gods of inconsequence.... It is precisely because of its relative inconsequence, that sport allows us such freedom of emotional commitment: should the home team lose, 'it's a shame' – but the buses still run, water leaks are repaired, and the body is more or less what it was before. Vicariously, we have risked, we have dared, we have struggled, we have won and lost."

Thus speak the scholars. But what about the fans and players? They are probably more in sympathy with columnist George Will, who once retorted, "Baseball, it is said, is only a game. True. And the Grand Canyon is only a hole in Arizona. Not all holes, or games are created equal." I know my family would agree. As for myself, if anyone had told me ten years ago that I would spend endless hours of motherhood pitching balls and fielding plays; that there would be four worn holes in the grass of my lawn in the shape of a diamond, never to be reseeded; that printouts of box scores and player stats would litter my coffee table; that my children would refuse to go to school unless the uniform of their favorite player was clean enough to wear, I would have laughed. I would have rolled my eyes. Me, a baseball mom? But I would have been wrong. A baseball mom is not such a bad thing to be. After all, it's kind of fun. And what hardened heart can resist the thrill of a home run in the bottom of the ninth?

Wes Westrum, former Mets manager, observes that "Baseball is like church. Many attend, but few understand." But, I wonder, is that really true, that only a chosen few get it? Last summer, we treated Wayne's whole family to a St. Paul Saints game. It was a sweltering hot day and people brought their umbrellas to the game for shade. After the seventh inning stretch, the sky grew dark and the wind picked up. The home team was losing. A few sensible people got up and left. The eighth inning passed and the Saints had a chance. We entered the bottom of the ninth with a one run game and heard a distant clap of thunder. My mother-in-law looked worriedly at the sky, but it was clear that my boys would not be moved. They were not the only ones. The crowd stayed. The last Saints batter struck out, just like the great Casey, and the game was over. At that exact moment the clouds burst open and the rain poured down. Not a sprinkle, not a drizzle, but a waterfall. We were drenched to the skin. As we slushed our way back to our cars amid the laughing, skipping, cheerful throng of people, I thought, "Maybe we're all just crazy. Or maybe we're not!" The rain felt wonderful after the stifling heat. I was reminded of Howard Thurman's words "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." This is the gift which baseball has unexpectedly brought to me and my family in these past few years. We are not the first, nor the last to receive this gift, but, I am grateful. So, play ball!