

The Cadences of Faith

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Mark 10:35-45

This summer I was overjoyed to watch baseball games in four different major league ballparks – Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Washington and of course, Philadelphia. It was awesome. Even a less than stellar game or a team nowhere close to contention is still baseball. Given COVID restrictions and driving realities, I purchased tickets ahead of time. It's both easier and more complicated than simply getting a ticket at the gate the day of the game. Apps are involved, and smartphones and therefore technology anxiety, at least for me. At one game I couldn't access my ticket on my phone and a nice young man – a combination of helpfulness and bemusement detectable on the half of his face that I could see – helped me figure it out. I joked that he had been hired strictly to help people like me, and he did not disagree with that assessment.

You may know that baseball is facing something of an identity crisis. Lower attendance. Decreased interest from younger generations. A series of self-inflicted controversies, including a seeming indifference to racial justice and gender equity. Given that, and given all of this technology, I should not have been surprised to receive an email survey after each game, seeking my input on the fan experience. None of the surveys actually asked about the game – that seemed almost secondary. No, these questions were about the experience – parking, concessions, costs.

I am kind of an old-school fan – I don't pay much attention to scoreboard graphics or t-shirt cannons or races between presidents or costumed pork products. But I know that stuff matters, for generations younger than mine, matters sometimes beyond the actual game, especially when there is so much criticism of how slow, even boring, baseball can be. So I was interested to receive these surveys.

But I was interested for at least one other reason as well. Let me read you a few questions. And see if any resonate with you, and see if any resonate with you if you do what I did, simply replacing the word "baseball," or "game," with the word "church."

- >The games fell too slow and/or long.
- >The game has changed in ways that I don't agree with.
- >It takes a lot of time to keep up with baseball.
- >It costs a lot of money.
- >The game has not caught up with the times.
- >It's a big hassle to attend a game.

See what I mean? Church and baseball. Baseball and church. In many ways, church and baseball are facing similar trajectories – once the national pastime, baseball long ago was replaced by football as a cultural priority. Once presumed as almost a given, church attendance and participation is now one choice among many, a choice made increasingly by fewer and fewer of us. “Church attendance hemorrhaging following the pandemic” was one uplifting article I read recently.

And so churches, maybe even this one, are asking questions about all of this.

Some are the right questions, but I worry that not all are. I don't long for the times where people automatically went to church because it was the thing to do.

But because that has changed so dramatically, we often treat church like baseball

– with just the right between inning contests or fancy scoreboard graphics or innovative concessions – crab nachos, anyone? – we will reclaim lost generations and generate larger market share.

Now don't get me wrong. John Shelby Spong, a controversial to some Episcopal bishop who died in the last couple of weeks, wrote a book called "Why the Church Must Change or Die," and I believe that. What kind of change, though, matters, and why. I worry that, like baseball, and so many other things, that we've drifted from the core purpose and focused on the periphery. There was a time, and we may still be in it, where we battled about worship styles, the hymns we sing and whether we should put those hymns on screens, as if that was the sole reason 20-somethings were staying away. Or the saving power of a Starbucks-like coffee shop in every fellowship hall. Mind you, I believe that how we engage each other, and engage guests – of all generations – matters, and we can always be more mindful and thoughtful. But the premise of the baseball survey feels as if the game itself doesn't matter, and I wouldn't want the same to be true for church, that entertainment trumps engagement, that style trumps substance. How we do things matters, of course it does, whether in worship or any of the other things we do, But the "what," and more so, the "why," need to precede the "how."

I hope that you received in the mail – very old school – a letter indicating that we are now entering our 2022 stewardship effort, a time when we focus on the resources needed to enable the church to do what it’s called to do, primarily financial resources, money. I am not one who believes that a stewardship theme is the ultimate cause for generating your support. At the same time, a stewardship theme can be an entry point into a conversation, the “why” that leads to the “how.”

And so your fabulous Stewardship Committee submits the following theme for your consideration. *Gather*Bless*Serve*. It is what we do. It reflects the rhythm of our life together, the cadences of faith. We come together, gather, to worship and to do other things – to study, to connect. We are blessed when we do so – blessed by God and blessed by the gifts of one another. We depart to serve, whether in the mission activities of this place – casserole making as one example – but also having been transformed so that we live our daily lives differently. Gather. Bless. Serve. A sequence, A rhythm. A cadence. *How* we do that, what that looks like, must change, or we will, per Bishop Spong, die. But that

foundational rhythm will persist. Baseball will always mean throwing the ball, catching the ball, hitting the ball. How we gather and bless and serve might evolve. That we do it won't, I submit.

This theme also reflects the sequencing of things that Matthew 25 suggests for us. You will remember that we have identified ourselves as a Matthew 25 congregation, joining a denominational initiative that focuses on congregational vitality, and working to end poverty and racism. In Matthew 25, Jesus portrays a gathering of the nations, where eternal rewards are dispensed, sheep and goats. Gather. Bless. But the blessings are imparted based on how followers treated one another – the least of these, those facing hunger or homelessness or any of a number of human sufferings. Having gathered, the blessing is predicated on serving.

We will continue to explore the dynamics of all of that, but it does suggest, again, a rhythm, a cadence of faith – that the gathering and blessing can never be their own end, that entertainment, to use the crasser, survey-based term, or engagement, must always lead to service, or that the basic point is missed. Worship matters. Concerts matter. Sunday school and Second Hour matter.

Firepit gatherings matter. Even attending baseball games together as a congregation matters. Absolutely and of course. The gathering that leads to blessing. But if we stop there, without that leading to transformed lives transforming the world, then we have missed the mark. A stewardship season will point out what that looks like – today it is our Center on the Hill, a fabulous program. Later weeks will share other facets of this. Gather. Bless. Serve.

Jesus clearly understood this. His life embodied and reflected it. The others, the followers, not so much. Two of the disciples make a very gutsy request of Jesus. They want places of prominence in his kingdom, and they are brazen enough to ask for it. That is, they actively seek the blessing. Jesus tells them that they do not understand, that for them to receive anything like that, that they must endure what he has, and will, endure. That is to say, no blessing without serving.

The other ten are infuriated by this power grab, so Jesus lays it out for all of them. You are thinking of power, and greatness, and popularity, in the wrong way, he says. You are thinking like the world thinks. Whether that is celebrity, or influence, or wealth, that is not what my project, my initiative, my life and ministry, is about. “...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your

servant,” he says, “and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Now we can wrestle, and should, with the implications of that slavery imagery for 21st century readers, but the point is clear, and unvarnished. Greatness equals service, for Jesus, and therefore for we who follow him. In case we miss that part about giving life away, such service had extraordinary implications.

Again, though, that rhythm, that cadence. We gather. We are blessed. We serve. And the reason I am so focused, even fixated, on the baseball metaphor is not only because I am a huge baseball fan. I hope we can learn from it, and that when we do all of the things we do – like gathering, like blessing – we can always remember that those need to feed, to form and give shape to, the serving.

Stewardship 2022 will highlight that, Matthew 25 will highlight that.

I think we know it in our bones; it is imprinted in our DNA. But every so often, like the disciples, we need the reminder. Eugene Peterson writes that “...As Christians

we seem to have moved away from following Jesus to trying to get something from Jesus. (A) lot of people see God and church as a place to go and get what they need, what they want..." (*As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, p. 246)

We need the whole enchilada, as they say, the complete package. Gathering. Blessing. Serving. Serving is the form our faith will ultimately take, but it will be effective only when it has been nurtured in gathered community and blessed by all the things a church does. Without the integrity of the whole, the rhythm will be off, the cadence out of sync. We are called to support that with our money, to be sure. At a deeper level, we are called to enter that rhythm, that cadence, to find our place, our role, and to find greatness, a different brand of greatness, that will transform your soul and transform the world, in the name and for the sake of the one whose cup we drink and whose greatness is love. Amen.