

The Sidelines
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30, Pentecost 8, Year A
6 July 2008
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

As you know, I grew up Arkansas. For those of you born and raised here in Wahoo and Hokie country, you're going to have to take my word that football in my part of the world is religion. I'm from a state where kids are raised wearing big plastic hats shaped like razorbacks (that's a vicious wild pig with sharp tusks, in case you're wondering) and participating in a sacred and holy liturgical rite referred to as "Calling the Hogs."

Forget other sports. We didn't even know what soccer was. When you grow up in small town Arkansas, football is *everything*, and in high school I, like most other boys, played football. I was twenty-five pounds lighter then than I am now (if you can believe that). In my football helmet and shoulder pads I resembled one of those potato figures school children carve with toothpicks for legs. I was so top-heavy that in a gust of wind I'd sway.

In order to get off the sidelines and onto the field in high school, I learned pretty quickly that all I had to do was hit the guy across from me with reckless abandon. At my high school, we were small and malnourished "city kids" (Paragould, Arkansas, population 12,214), and the teams we played were made up of beef and grain-fed country boys who generally looked like a cross between Paul Bunyan and a gorilla. My more intelligent teammates were hesitant to run full steam into these monsters, but I wasn't. I would hit the kid across from me, and so I got to play. The problem was, I was afraid to look at the person I was hitting. I knew if I saw the berserker fury in his eyes I might lose my nerve. So I tackled with my head down. And by midway through my sophomore year I ruptured a disk in my neck. (C6, for the physicians in the congregation.)

My mother took me to the neurologist in Jonesboro, and after a 45-minute MRI he gave me the bad news. "*You'll-have-to-quit-playing-football*," Dr. Tonyman said, seemingly in movie-like slow motion.

Recall how I began this story. Football was my lifeblood. The doctor might just as well have said, "You'll have to gouge your eyes out and wander aimlessly through the Mojave Desert until you become listless and die."

I, all sixteen years of gridiron toughness, immediately began to cry like a baby. "You mean I have to sit out this Friday?" I asked.

"No," Dr. Tonyman replied, "that's not what I mean."

“You mean I have to sit out for the rest of the *season*?” I asked. (This was getting worse by the second.)

“*No*,” he said with finality. “You have to quit playing football altogether. The risk of serious injury to your neck is too great.”

At that point, I vaguely recall throwing a tantrum similar to those my four-year-old, Eliza, is capable of. But then Dr. Tonyman crouched down so as to look at me, coach-like, square in the eye (but not, I feel sure, before glancing down at my toothpick legs dangling from the exam table). “Son,” he said, “You weren’t college material.” And that was the end of my football career. I was sidelined.

Is there anything worse? Is there anything in all of human experience more lamentable, more frustrating, than being sidelined? Growing up, we experience it in sports. In adult life we experience it in many arenas, when we feel as though we are marginalized in our social lives, when we experience a passing over in our professional lives. As we age, we find ourselves sidelined from activities simply because our bodies will not allow us to do all the things we once enjoyed. Regardless of the circumstances, we loathe being sidelined. It makes us feel as though the important things in life are passing us by, like the plays moving up and down the football field, and all we can do is watch.

But despite this aversion, there are times—ironically—when we sideline *ourselves*. And perhaps this happens never so often as in our lives of faith.

This is the context in which Jesus speaks this morning. In Matthew’s Gospel just before we get to today’s reading, Jesus has castigated the gathered crowd for sidelining themselves in faith. They claim to wait for word of the Messiah, but when John the Baptist came proclaiming, he was such an odd ascetic who didn’t joke or play or enjoy life, that they dismissed him as possessed by demons. Then Jesus himself came along—the very opposite of John, one who did joke and play and even have a drink or two—and the people dismissed *him* as a drunkard and a glutton. The crowd, who claim to yearn for new life and new love in God, have conveniently restricted themselves to the sidelines. No matter who comes along, they rationalize staying put. Like a recluse who claims one day that the cloudy sky makes it too ominous to go outside and the next day that the bright sun might scorch her skin, the people will not venture into a new place.

In today’s reading, Jesus offers his own analogy. The people are like moody children who sit in the town square, begging to play but being unsatisfied and unresponsive to the music

and games offered them. It would be one thing if the people could claim not to have heard the music in the market place, not to have heard the Gospel call of Jesus. But they *have* heard, and yet they rationalize away every opportunity to leave the sidelines and enter into the life of active faith.

So do we. It would be easy for me to focus on a lack of church attendance as sitting on the sidelines, but I mean much more than that. Even being in church regularly can mean little more than being a spectator in the life of faith. I'm not exactly talking about involvement in church activities either (though I'd surely encourage increased involvement). We sideline ourselves just as the ancient crowd did. We hear the message that God wants to be in relationship with us, not in some esoteric or intellectual way, but with the same depth and intimacy as a friend, or, if you'll allow, a lover. The invitation is alluring, as when we hear a good sermon or religious song, but it also makes us uncomfortable. What if we opened our lives to God in this way? What might happen? At times it scares the bejeezus out of us. And so we rationalize staying on the sidelines with all sorts of excuses: *When the kids get older...when things settle down...when I get over this illness...when I find a more open-minded church, or when I find a more orthodox one...*

Forget all that, Jesus says! God wants to know us—to *love* us. Can you imagine? We are a priority in *God's* life, and he wants us so to enter into faith that he becomes a priority in *ours*.

No matter where I am, at home or on the road, the moment I awake from sleep my wife and my children are on my mind. What *would* it be like if this were true of God, if the attention and claim of the God of love were foremost in our minds, our hearts, our entire being? It would change everything, wouldn't it? No decision would be made in the same way. No interaction with another person would be quite so blithe and dismissive. No choice would be made under the illusion that our self-serving wants or needs are the most important thing. It would affect every aspect of our lives. Sounds like a heavy burden. Sounds like a yoke around the neck.

It is, in some ways. But rather than toil, it's like the burden borne by a football player or any athlete, by a musician or by anyone else who follows a laudable pursuit with passion. The sweat and dedication of heart add difficulty to life, especially at first, as things are re-prioritized to make space for practice, meditation, study, and the intentional rest necessary for all of these. But ask a runner for whom the marathon has become a spiritual exercise whether life was better before or since he has taken on this burden. Ask the pianist whether the keyboard defines her

life. Ask them if they'd ever return to the sidelines, now that they've experienced how richly their lives have been transformed.

From their point-of-view, those who look on from the periphery appear as the armchair quarterback or the petty critic, failing to understand that life and meaning—or wisdom, as the Gospel says today—are found only in *participation*, not opining from the sidelines.

There is a legend that at the creation birds had no wings. When wings were given to them, they rebelled, saying that the new appendages were heavy, awkward, and burdensome. But when the first bird finally, reluctantly accepted her wings, she found that she could fly! Only that burden could lift her to the sky. “The weight of Christ’s yoke is wings to the soul.”¹

Once again, Jesus comes this day and offers his burden. He tells of the God he knows, the God who, through him, we can know. We sit on the market wall as God’s music plays in front of us. We sit on the sidelines, but a voice is calling us onto the field.

We sit on the sidelines. Will we take wing and take flight?

Amen.

¹ *The Interpreter’s Bible*, volume 7, pg. 391.