

All Saints Sunday, November 6, 2016

World Series Saints

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We were about half way through our first date when the man I (eventually) married said to me, he'd "rather watch paint dry than baseball." At the risk of ending a relationship that was going really well, I responded by telling him I am actually a big fan of baseball. I told him how I enjoy baseball not just as a sport but as a metaphor for life. Baseball, it has been said, is a lot like life. Baseball will break your heart, yet it is also a practice of hope, as many fans of teams that do not often reach the World Series have embraced the wisdom of the Chicago Cubs fans who usually end the season by saying, "Wait till next year." As many of you know, this is the year for the Cubs, and Indians fans are the ones reminded that baseball, like life, can break your heart, but there's always next year. And in the spring we will again hear that unique sound of a wooden bat making solid contact with a baseball and the satisfying *thunk* the same ball makes as it is caught in neat's foot oil conditioned baseball glove. As a lifelong Milwaukee Brewers fan, I can hardly wait for next year.

This year's World Series reminded me of another reason I enjoy baseball; how baseball is sometimes like the best parts of church or religion. To me it is no accident that the last game of the World Series happened to fall on All Soul's Day, the day after the calendar day for All Saints Day. While All Saints is the day we celebrate all people in the Body of Christ, All Soul's is a day when we Christians remember the Christians who have died. Today we are actually combining the two days, and in a few moments we will read the names of those who have died to honor All Souls Day and through the music and hymns, readings, collect, and sermon honor all the saints, who former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams describes as "the people who are courageous enough to stand in the light of God and let that light shine through them." The former Archbishop's quote can remind us that today is not about celebrating just the people who are saints, the famous and not so famous, it is about remembering the way we all participate in the connectedness of following Christ. That at its best, religion or church is not just liturgy, hymnody, belief systems, rules and charity; it is a unique connection between God and the people of God and the people of God with each other. And there is something of the hopeful kingdom of heaven in that holy connection.

The World Series helped me see and participate in that holy connection when a friend of mine in Wisconsin whose name is Holly posted on Facebook a few hours before Game 7 on All Souls Day. Holly is a teacher, relationship coach, family therapist, tutor, writer, wife, mother, and grandmother whose own mother died when she was quite young. She often talks about her mother and the loss she feels and the ways she still feels connected to her mother. Her Facebook post started out with the intention of sharing that connection when she talked about the last time the Chicago Cubs were in the World Series. It was 1945, Holly's uncle was just home from the war, her mother (who grew up in Chicago and was a lifelong Cubs fan) sat by the radio during that series, and because Wriggley Field did not have lights yet, all the games were played during the day. As she listened to the games, Holly's mother kept score on a score card. When her father, Holly's grandfather, got home from work, her mother and grandfather sat down together and her mother gave a play by play account of the game from her score card and they enjoyed the game together. Holly went on to say how it was her mother who passed her love of baseball on to Holly, and how Holly was thinking of her mother that night of the final game of the World Series, imagining the scene from the past, and grateful for the ways she was feeling connected to her mother at that very moment.

That was just the beginning. I added my own comment to her post about how it was my mother who taught me about baseball too, who with my father took me to my first baseball game, who bought me my first score card. One way my mom and I stay connected now that I live farther away is we both follow the Milwaukee Brewers and I said hurray for the mothers and grandmothers who pass their love of baseball on to the next generation. Others shared their memories of fathers, mothers, uncles, and friends who loved baseball and one person even said they hadn't liked baseball much, but after reading Holly's post they were re-thinking their assessment of the game. My friend's post was powerful and opened up a way for others to share why they love baseball and how watching or listening to a game can make them feel a little closer to the person or persons who shared their love of baseball with them. As I read each post, I couldn't help but be reminded of All Saints, and the real meaning and value of the holy day.

Many of us are here today because of someone we love, who shared with us the best way they could their love of God and their love of the Church. The Church, like baseball, is far from perfect. The Church, like baseball, is made up of people who strike out more times than they hit home runs. The Church, like baseball, will and has broken many a heart. The Church, like baseball, doesn't give up, doesn't let those strikeouts, foul balls, double-plays, errors or bad calls stop her; she keeps getting back into that batter's box. The Church, like baseball, has seen changes and yet clings to traditions, sometimes to its detriment. The Church, like baseball, is also about hope, hope that is lived out in connections with God and the very same flawed saints who manage to keep playing even when they seem to be losing because by doing so they are showing us there is something far more important than winning. They remind us that it is by playing the game that does something to us, and sometimes that something can be transformation into what God dreams we can be.

Some of you might remember the first sermon I preached here, two years ago on All Saints Sunday, about my grandmother whose love of God and the Episcopal church challenged the long-time tradition of the male only priesthood much to her daughter (my own mother's) discomfort; how my grandmother's courage helped me find the courage to say yes to God's call even though my mother and father did not support the ordination of women. And how by my living into God's call my parents changed and grew closer to God, to each other, to me, and even though she didn't live to see me ordained, in some mysterious way the connection with my grandmother was also strengthened because the thing that grew those connections was God. It is all an awesome mystery that truly does transcend time and space that is made possible because my grandmother stood in God's light and was brave enough to let that light shine through her. Yet my grandmother isn't the only saint in that story, my parents are also saints because they were willing to let that light of God shine on them, even if they disagreed with what my grandmother thought and what I did. That they were open to transformation is what makes them saints.

Saints remind us it isn't quite enough to listen to those gorgeous yet challenging beatitudes in Luke's Gospel we just heard, or just talk about them, we have to live them, even when it is hard: to love our enemies. to pray for those who disagree let alone hurt us. to work to change an unjust system that ignores the needs of the poor and refuses to feed the hungry or provide health care to all people. Maybe we don't even want to do those things. Maybe we'd rather enact

vengeance on those who hurt us, or offend us. Maybe sometimes, we do. Maybe we don't always forgive. Maybe we ignore the people who challenge us to be more Christ like. Maybe we'd rather discredit the saints than listen to them because there really is no such thing as a perfect saint, and that can mean we're all off the hook.

So thank God for the saints, who keep trying despite their failings or flaws, who show us what looks like weakness in the eyes of popular culture or status quo is actually a strength, who give us glimpses of the way things can be, and do more than inspire us. Thank God for the saints who invite us to join them, who tell us we can't go back to the way things were, that they didn't live to keep the past alive but to keep bringing God's Kingdom a little closer to everyone.

Two years ago, something mysterious and holy happened when I came to supply here and a bunch of saints saw the Light of God in our shared encounter and we all stood in the light and shined that light by doing what is nearly unheard of in the Episcopal Church: you as a parish asked the diocese if you could interview me for your priest-in-charge. Usually it works the other way around: the diocese gives you the people the diocese thinks you should interview. That was a saintly thing to do, because you weren't trying to be rebellious, you sensed God was at work and you wanted to explore that further. Now we are together, we celebrate together, we grieve together, heal together, we worship together, we are growing together, laughing together, ministering together, wondering together, and we are still exploring what God wants us to do together, not to bring back the past but to live into the dream God has for Church of the Good Shepherd.

That is the work of the saints, and today perhaps we can do more than name the saints, perhaps we can reflect on the ways we can participate deeper in the mysterious and awesome connections between God, ourselves and those saints of God, those avenues of growth that have contributed to transformations that transcend space and time. Such transformations can be powerful. Just ask my husband, who now joins me on the couch when we get that rare treat of being able to watch the Milwaukee Brewers baseball game on TV. He's changed his mind about the appeal of drying paint because some saints showed him the hopeful beauty of baseball and its ability to connect to those he loves.