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Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

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The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Today's sermon is taken from Matthew, chapter 21, verses 33-46.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Since this is football season and I'm still trying to recover from the Patriots' loss last week, I want to begin with a couple of football stories. The first is about a place kicker who was so angry with himself after missing a field goal that when he got to the sidelines he literally kicked himself. Yup, he missed there too!

The second story concerns a game between traditional football powers -- Michigan State and UCLA. The score was tied at fourteen with only seconds to play. Duffy Daugherty, Michigan State's coach, sent in a place kicker, Dave Kaiser who booted a field goal and won the game. When Kaiser returned to the bench, Coach Daugherty said, "Nice going!" Daugherty noted that with some surprise, "But you didn't watch the ball after you kicked it." "That's right, coach," Kaiser replied. "I was watching the referee instead to see how he signaled it. I forgot my contact lenses and I couldn't see the goalpost." Now, that's what every team needs -- a vision-impaired field goal kicker.

Now football is a wonderful sport, but what is interesting about all sports is that there are some people who always cheer for the underdog. Have you noticed that? These people are masochists. Cheering for the underdog is the surest way possible to be disappointed most of the time. We Red Sox fans have learned that over the years. I mean, let's face it; some teams would have a difficult time against the cheerleading squad.

Coach Lou Holtz made an interesting comment when he was coaching at South Carolina. He said, "Someone wrote a great football song for us that could be sung only after a winning game and by the time we won a game, everybody had forgotten the words."

"The race is not always to the swift," says the writer of Ecclesiastes, "nor the battle to the strong." "But," says one cynic, "That's the smart place to put your money. In every game there is an underdog, a team that is overmatched, a team that is not expected to win, and many of us can't help cheering for that

underdog.”

Who would have thought that Tampa Bay at the beginning of September would end up being the wildcard choice in the American League? Who would have thought in 2004 after the third game that the Red Sox would beat the Yankees? Who would have thought after Dave Roberts stole second base that somehow the Red Sox would have won four games in a row and gone on to win the World Series?

The gospel for today suggests that Jesus knew what it was to be an underdog. Jesus was not expected to win. The writer of the gospel of Matthew puts it this way quoting two verses from Psalm 118: “Have you never read in the scriptures,” he asked, “the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” These words have brought inspiration to millions of believers through the ages. “The stone the builders rejected has become the corner stone.”

Jesus knows what it is to be rejected. It says of him the stone the builders rejected. That is a clear reference to Jesus. Jesus was rejected by his own people, and that’s the first thing I want you to see this morning. Jesus knows what it is to battle overwhelming odds, Jesus knows what it is to be disrespected, to be in great pain, and ultimately to confront death. Jesus knows what it is to be the underdog. I want you to remember that the next time you are in a tight spot. Remember that when you are rejected, when you lose the big contract, when you get bad news from the doctor, even when the final door, the door of death, is closing in your face, Jesus has faced it all. He knows what it is to be on the losing end.

This is important, I think. Sometimes all of us are underdogs. If you look at yourself as a top dog, and you think that you will never be on a losing side, just wait. Life happens, and all of us sooner or later will draw a short straw. We live, for example, in a time of soaring divorce rates. It rarely happens that two people walk away from a divorce both feeling that they have won. Usually, at least one partner loses in a big way. And that’s why it’s important to know that Jesus not only was the underdog and understood what it is to lose, but that Jesus was also victorious and teaches us that we can be victorious too.

Now, notice these words again: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” These are important words. Jesus is speaking to a crowd that included scribes and Pharisees. That was the very religious establishment that would be responsible for his death on the cross. “To them,” writes theologian Hans Kung, “Jesus was a scandalon, small stone over which one might

stumble.” He was attacked on all sides. He had not played any of the expected roles. For those who supported law and order, Jesus turned out to be a provocateur, dangerous to the system. Jesus disappointed the activist revolutionaries by nonviolent love of peace. Jesus offended passive world-forsaking aesthetics by his worldliness, and for those who adapted themselves to the world, Jesus was too uncompromising. For the silent majority, Jesus was too noisy, and for the noisy minority, he was too quiet; too gentle for the strict and too strict for the gentle. And thus, Jesus was rejected by the religious establishment, and eventually by the crowds that had once hailed him. For the moment those who persecuted him looked like the winners; they had their way with Jesus. They had him scourged, they whipped up the crowd to yell, “Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!” They planted his cross in the ground and hung him there naked in utter shame and humiliation. They won, at least that is how it was seen, but only for a while.

“The stone the builders rejected has become the corner stone.” Jesus was saying to the scribes and Pharisees that he was the stone that would be rejected. Their way, however, was fated to fail. They would reject him, but that he would become the cornerstone of a new approach to faith, to life, to God.

I really think you need to understand about cornerstones. A cornerstone is everything when you are building a structure. My former church in Southington was built in 1890, and the cornerstone had the marks of the date of building beginning; and also inside the cornerstone they had placed a copper box with things from the 1890s. It was the beginning; it was the beginning of the whole church in that town. It was the foundation. Everything else is built upon this one cornerstone. If the cornerstone is straight and square, the rest of the building will be straight and square. A building that leans will not endure. Jesus, the stone that was rejected became the cornerstone, the most important stone in the new temple which God alone was constructing. The underdog would become a victor and so it is with everyone who tries their best to follow Jesus. The Christian faith is a positive faith, a hopeful faith; it is a faith of overcoming obstacles, a faith of believing that no mountain is too high and no valley is too deep.

As Rocky Balboa said in one of his Rocky movies, “You, me, or no one is going to hit as hard as life, but it ain’t about how hard you hit; it’s about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. That’s who we want to be. People, who by the grace of God, keep moving forward regardless of what life may send. But it’s not in our own strength that we conquer. And again, these two lines from scripture (actually they’re from the Psalms), “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this and it is marvelous

in our eyes.” It is God who is our strength. It is God who gives us the victory. And here is the good news for the day: If you trust in God with all your heart and with all your mind and all your being, you will ultimately win with God.

Several years ago I went to visit a man at Massachusetts General Hospital who was in his late seventies who had been in the hospital several days awaiting death. In the middle of the night my phone rang. It was the man’s wife. They had just called her from the hospital to say that the end was near. Would I please come by, pick her up and go with her. In the hospital, her son and daughter were already by the bedside. Her husband lay there, his eyes shut, in an oxygen mask on his face. Once or twice he seemed to be struggling with mask, and his son reached out and straightened it and moved his hand away. The third or fourth time, I said, “Wait a minute. Maybe he wants it off so he can say something.” He did want to say something. “Hold my hand,” he murmured huskily to his wife. She took his hand and stood by the bed. The mask was restored, and this time he lay quietly, content to be holding his wife’s hand, and then very gently and soothingly the wife began to sing *Amazing Grace*. They were on the last verse of *Amazing Grace*, “*When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun.*” when the lifeline on the bedside monitor went flat and the man was gone. For me it was an amazing experience. When they entered the room they had been in pain and suffering and tension, but now when the man died in the strains of the *Amazing Grace*, there was a joy and a composure and even thanksgiving. Everything was good. Life, death, everything.

It is good. All of us, no matter how charmed our life has been until now, will sometime know what it is to be an underdog. At such times it is good to know that Jesus was an underdog too. “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this and is marvelous in our eyes.” It is marvelous in our eyes as Jesus was victorious. Through Him, through Jesus, we can be victorious too.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs