



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Keep Your Eye off the Ball

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 30, 2012

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Mark 9:38-50

Those with ears to hear, let them hear. There once was a father who was nearing the end of his sojourn on earth. He was blessed with the awareness that his day was coming, and so he took it upon himself to put his affairs in order. His intent was to pass on his estate to his two beloved children. And he had a fine plan. He liquidated all of his assets and took it upon himself, at spectacular cost, to procure two of the rare Fabergé eggs, priceless jeweled eggs that open up to reveal a precious surprise inside. And these weren't just any Fabergé eggs. The ones the father chose were Imperial Eggs, made for the Tsar Alexander III and his family. And the father also used a crack investigative team to scour the planet for two of the "lost" Imperial Eggs, those that had been hidden from public view for a hundred years. Upon completing his search, the now penniless father took the two eggs and his two children out with him onto a high bridge to watch the sun set. As the sun touched the horizon, the father told his children that it was time for him to leave. And through the tears, he took the precious eggs out of his pocket and gave one to each of his children. The children were grateful beyond measure, and they embraced their father in bittersweet thanksgiving. But as they watched the sun continue to set, the children began to examine their eggs. Within one was a hen with a sapphire pendant. Within another egg was a miniature cherub riding a gilded chariot. One was made in 1888. One was made two years earlier. One had a scratch on the bottom. Another had a small jewel missing from the top. The children began to argue over which one was the more valuable, quietly at first, but then coming to blows. And as they fought, the father watched the eggs fall from their hands, roll off the bridge, and kerplunk into the black water. Those with eyes, let them see.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus is the one trying to convey a rich inheritance to his friends, the disciples. He speaks about how his holy mission is going to require great loss, but that this loss will be overcome by a type of life that they have never seen before. Rather than dig deeper into what he means by this, the disciples quarrel among themselves over who is the best. And Jesus is so disturbed by this folly that he sits them all down and asks them to look at the little children. When someone plays the flute pretending that they are at a wedding, they dance as if they were at a wedding. When someone shoots them with a fake arrow, they play dead. They know how to play. They know how to give and receive, back and forth, in circles of delight. But you, you are playing the wrong game. You are scrambling for first place. Look at the children. There is no first place in their games. See their joy, and learn from them.

But this lesson is barely heard. They do abandon arguing over which of them is the greatest. They do this by deciding that they are all the greatest. And they transfer their envy and rivalry to a person who is outside their group. This is someone who is casting out demons in Jesus' name. "Who is this guy? What authority does he have? We are the chosen ones. Jesus called us personally. How dare he speak for Jesus. How dare he heal people without getting our approval. We tried to stop him because he is not with us. But he got away. We'll get him next time, Jesus!" But Jesus said, "Don't stop him! He is on our side! Whoever is not against us is for us. Can you not see? If he is healing others in my name, and it is working, you should be grateful. How sad would it be if it only stopped with you. This is bigger than the twelve of you. Do not get in his way!"

The disciples aren't the only ones who are defining themselves over and against other people. They are in the company of everyone on the planet. Nearly every person, every tribe, every culture, every empire, finds great strength rallying against an enemy. Oftentimes, this is one of the few things that unite people. What better than a common rival to galvanize a team on the sports field or in the office? What better than a common enemy to spur a corporation to excel, an army to rally, or a group of friends to feel closer? How much of our lives are grounded in

being acutely sensitive to what our rivals are or aren't doing? We keep vigil not in prayer to God, but in envy of our neighbor. And how much wasted energy is expended? How much strife is nursed and pursued, how much violence is done, in wanting what someone else has, rather than wanting what God has given us? How much of us would be left if we gave this up?

The disciples are so claimed by this spirit of rivalry that they risk losing everything that Jesus is trying to give them. And if you are claimed by this spirit, you will miss the lion's share of what God is doing in your life. The disciples twist the gifts from God into spirits of bitter rivalry and zealous ambition for more status and prestige. Jesus is trying to show them the marvelous power of being last, and they insist on being first. How can they follow the way if they are lost in the wilderness? So this is where Jesus enters some dark territory to scare them out of the wilderness back to the lit path. What follows is rhetorical cold water in the face.

“If your hand causes you to stumble in this way, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”

Now, to be clear, in this passage, Hell is not the popular understanding of a place of fire in the afterlife. The word for Hell here in the Greek is *Gehenna*. This is an actual place of fire on earth, a valley outside of the city walls of Jerusalem. A former location of child sacrifice that was criticized long before Jesus by the prophet Jeremiah. In the time of the disciples, the practice was gratefully stamped out, and Gehenna had become the city dump, constantly ablaze and being fed by the unending procession of trash. And so Jesus gives them a stark hypothetical choice to chew on. Would you rather be thrown into the fire like trash, or lose an eye? Would you rather lose your life, or lose an arm?

In the same way, would you rather waste your life in missing the joy in life, or cut off that significant part of you that is nursing that grudge? Would you rather be drawn into quarrels that will never end, or cut out that part of you that has to be the best? Would you rather keep your eye on the ball, or open your eyes to the things of much grander scope that matter most of all?

There is a video available online that asks you to watch a group of people, some in white shirts and some in black shirts, throw a ball back and forth. You are to count how many times the people wearing white shirts pass the basketball among themselves. If you keep your eye on that ball, you may be able to keep count. But—and this strains belief but it is true—you will miss the man in a gorilla suit who is walking through the group. If you keep your eye on what other people are doing, you miss the most interesting thing there! God is like that gorilla! Jesus, too.

Jesus is trying to urge his disciples, and urge us who encounter him in our time, to see that a great deal is at stake when it comes to where we focus, where we set our eyes. And if our eyes are set on the wrong thing, the truth of our lives could be right in front of us, and we'd miss it. For the disciples, the incarnation of the Truth, the full presence of God was “this” close, and because of where they focused their gaze—upon each other and their relative status—they couldn't hear him or see him. And it would take his leaving them before they would be able to see properly. May God reach through our own haze of competition with our brothers and sisters, sooner rather than later. May we have ears to hear and eyes to see all the gifts that God is giving us before the sun sets.

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