

Baseball and the Bible - The Sacrifice Bunt

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Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Luke 9:23-25 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open up our hearts that we might feel, and then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

So why baseball in the Bible? Many years ago, I heard a wonderful comedy sketch by George Carlin. He passed away in 2008 and was given the Mark Twain Award for comedy posthumously that same year. He did a comparison between football and baseball. And I loved what he said. He said, "Baseball is played on a diamond in a park, a baseball park. But football is played on a gridiron in a stadium, sometimes called Soldier Field or War Memorial stadium. In football, you wear a helmet, but in baseball, you can just wear a cap. In football, it's connected with downs where you say, 'what down is it?' But baseball is concerned with 'ups.' You ask, 'Who's up?' Football is played in any kind of weather - rain, snow, sleet, hail, fog. But in baseball, if it rains, we don't go out to play.

"The objectives of the two games are completely different. In football, the object is for the quarterback to be on target with an aerial assault riddling the defense by hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy in spite of the blitz even if he has to use the shotgun. And with bullet passes and long bombs, he marches his troops into enemy territory balancing this aerial assault with a sustained ground attack that punches holes in the forward wall of the enemy's defensive line."

"But in baseball, the object is to go home and to be safe at home, 'I want to be safe at home.'"

See, that's why baseball is a Christian sport as far as I'm concerned. We'll talk a bit more about the value of baseball, youth sports, and all of that in the weeks to come. But today we want to talk about the sacrifice bunt.

Now a sacrifice bunt is where a batter allows himself to be put out intentionally in order to advance runners. The sacrifice bunt rule was added in 1940, and currently, it's Paragraph 9.08 in the official rule book of Major League Baseball. It says, "Score a sacrifice bunt when before two are out the batter advances one or more runners with a bunt and is put out at first base or would have been put out except for a fielding error." Then it has a whole series of extenuating circumstances.

Here's the funny thing - sacrifice bunting is rather out of fashion these days. Take a look at this chart, and you'll see that from 1940 to 2019, the number of sacrifice hits has fallen from 0.7 per game to 0.1 per game in the American League. You note a little dip in that chart from in 1972 when the designated hitter was added to the American League.

Now, much of this is from the managers and the new data-driven baseball that helps them to realize that it's not usually worth an out to advance runners - to put runners in a scoring position. But I think there's another reason. I think it's also because so much of the money in baseball is tied to individual statistics on how a player is doing individually with their stats. They don't want to bunt. They don't want to sacrifice. They don't want to make an out.

Let's take a look then from what we might learn from a sacrifice bunt. Our Scripture today from the Gospel of Luke says: "If you want to become my followers, deny yourselves and take up your cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) Notice that it says, "take up your cross daily and follow me," as Jesus says. But what does it mean to "take up your cross daily and follow me"?

It's a wonderful phrase that's really spoken to me. It says, "To live the cruciform Life..." the life that is shaped by and shaped like the cross. So, on the one hand, that means that you have a vertical axis that stretches up to God and a horizontal axis that reaches out to people around you. The idea of a cruciform life is to say that the cross is the very center of the expression of who God is. And that if you want to live the Christian life, the cross is the greatest model of what we're called to do and how we're called to live.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, there is a hymn that Paul quotes. I'll be honest because I think that other than the four gospels, this passage is among the most powerful in the New Testament. Maybe the most apart from the four gospels. And in it, Paul describes this cruciform life; this life shaped like a cross. Let me read the passage to you from Philippians: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." Then he begins the hymn, "...who though he was in the very form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:3-11)

That's the word of God for the people of God, friends! That's what a cruciform life looks like. I want to lift up three things out of that passage and reflect on them in light of Luke 9 on what it means to live the cruciform life.

The first is this: the sacrifice bunt, the cruciform life, means choosing servanthood. It means serving. Listen to what we just read, "Who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness." (Philippians 2:6-7)

So, he contrasts two different ways of life - this idea of *grasping* versus *emptying*, *servicing* versus *using* or *exploiting*. In fact, that word *grasped* is sometimes translated as *exploiting*.

No, the point of the passage of living the cruciform life is all about servanthood.

Now let's talk a minute about how we're called to serve. Sometimes to empty one's life, to give one's life away happens in big and dramatic ways. There are two people named George Fox that are an important part of Christian history. One of them was one of the founders of the Quakers. But the other was a Methodist minister. He met three

other men during World War II at Harvard University in the chaplain training program, and together they are referred to as "The Four Chaplains."

George L. Fox was a Methodist minister; Alexander D. Goode was a rabbi; Clark V. Polling was a pastor in the Dutch Reformed church, and John P. Washington was a Catholic Priest. And they are remembered together as "The Four Chaplains" because they were all aboard the *SS Dorchester*, a luxury liner that had been converted to a troopship. On February 2, 1943, they were on the *Dorchester* going from Newfoundland to Greenland, and a Nazi German submarine hit them with three torpedoes, and the ship sank.

There were 672 souls who died, and 230 men survived. Those survivors talked about these four chaplains and how they gave up their life vests, found life vests for other people, and continued to help people get onto the lifeboats. And as the *Dorchester* sank, the four of them were seen arm in arm leading those who couldn't get into the lifeboats in singing hymns and praying together. What an amazing and inspiring story! To give your life away that way is complete servanthood. It is inspiring, but it's rare.

Isn't it interesting that the Scripture says, to take up your cross daily? If you're going to die, that's not something that you can do daily if you're going to physically die. No, to take up your cross daily means small things. It means everyday life is about servanthood. In fact, it's funny, we say the sacrifice bunt and call it *small ball* because you're not trying to hit home runs, and you're just trying to move people around. It's small things.

It's making the phone call to someone who's lonely. It's helping to pick up the trash. It's serving your family. It's cooking the meal. It's making the bed, mowing the lawn, paying the bills, hauling the kids. It's changing the diaper. It's caring for an elderly parent or an elderly friend. It's taking someone to the hospital. It's writing the card or the note—so many things. Just little things over and over and over again become the habitual way of doing it, of doing life.

You see, servanthood is not going to come naturally to us. It's something that is learned and something that we have to practice.

It's funny, I was reading about the sacrifice bunt, and I was reading this piece from a sportswriter Rob Maaddi who writes in Philadelphia. He said, "'Guys don't want to work at it, and they can't bunt,' Philly's bench coach Larry Bowa said, 'they don't know how to

bunt. To me, if you practice bunting, it's the easiest thing in the world. But if you don't practice it's the hardest thing."

See, I believe that. Choosing to be a servant is something you have to learn, something you have to practice. And if you think you'd be able to stand on the deck of the *Dorchester* and give your whole life away, you've learned that by practicing it every single day in smaller things.

Albert Schweitzer said this: "I don't know what your destiny is, I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know is that the ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

So first, the sacrifice bunt, the cruciform life, is about servanthood.

Now here's the next thing. Let's keep reading, "Being born in human likeness and being found in human form, he humbled himself." The sacrifice bunt, this cruciform life, is about humility.

It's funny, the greatest sluggers of our time have never chosen to sacrifice bunt. The great Mike Trout has had no sacrifice bunts. Albert Pujols had one sacrifice bunt in his rookie season. Ted Williams had only two throughout his entire career. Jeff Bagwell had only three sacrifice bunts.

But that's because they were the greats! But the great Brooks Robinson, probably the best third baseman that's ever played the game, was a multiple MVP, was the MVP of the World Series, been in the Hall of Fame. He had 101 sacrifice bunts. He batted over 400 in the World Series but had 101 sacrifice bunts in his career because he was humble.

Here's what Gordon Beard, one of the sportswriters, writes about him. By the way, he was a Baltimore Oriole. It goes: "Brooks never asked anyone to name a candy bar after him, but in Baltimore, people named their children after him."

One of our church members gave me a wonderful book by John Dickson, and the title is *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love and Leadership*. *Humilitas* is a Latin phrase that means "to be brought low" or to make yourself low. So, if you are brought low, it's *humiliation*, but if you make yourself low, it's *humility*. It's interesting because in both Hebrew and Greek as well as Latin, the word that's there that's translated *humility* means to bring one's self down, to make oneself low.

Here's how John Dickson defines humility: "The noble choice to forego your status, deploy your resources, or use your influence for the good of others rather than yourself." To use whatever privilege or resources you have - we talk about privilege these days - to use whatever status you have to lift others up instead of lifting yourself up.

Listen to how this hymn was introduced by Paul: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. That literally would be the lowest form of servanthood, to lower oneself - literally - down to the ground to wash someone's feet. That's the mind that was in Christ Jesus.

A number of years ago, Jim Collins wrote a best selling book titled *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. He's written a number of others since then along the same vein. He also wrote a companion piece called *Good to Great and the Social Sector: Why Business Thinking Is Not the Answer*, where he dealt with non-profits and other groups instead of just businesses. And in it they looked at companies that had moved from *good to great* as the title said. The many companies that were really good sort of decline, but some moved from good to becoming great. And they looked at all the characteristics of those, and one of those characteristics was called Level Five Leadership. And that meant that they were led by people who had this drive to do the things that would help make the company successful. But they didn't want to be the center of attention. They wanted to divert that attention to other people.

Here's what Collins wrote: "The eleven Good to Great CEOs are some of the most remarkable CEOs of the century. Given that only 11 companies from the Fortune 500 met the exacting standards for entry into this study. Yet despite their remarkable results, almost no one ever remarked about them....," about these CEOs. He goes on: "The Good to Great leaders never wanted to become larger than life heroes. They never aspired to be put on a pedestal or to become unreachable icons."

That's humility. You see, that's to consider the needs of others above yourselves, to use whatever status, whatever privilege, whatever resources you have, not for self but for others.

I have to confess that this is hard. It doesn't come naturally - it's hard for all of us. It's certainly hard for me. We all have egos, we all want to be affirmed, we want to be liked, we want people to respect us, to think well of us. We want to be lifted up. But that ego inside us if you want to talk about what it means to carry a cross, that's what needs to be put to death. To be crucified with Christ means that that desire to be lifted up is put to death within us. It's hard.

I love what C.S. Lewis said, "If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it."

Humility. The sacrifice bunt, the cruciform life is about servanthood. The cruciform life, that sacrifice bunt, is about humility. And finally, this cruciform life, this sacrifice bunt, is about submission. It's about doing not what you want but what the one who you've put in charge of your life wants.

So the batter steps into the batter's box looks over at the manager or at the third base coach, and the manager gives the sign. He touches his nose, touches his hat, touches his chest, his arms, or whatever the signs are. That's one of my favorite parts of baseball. And the batter sees the sign to bunt - to sacrifice. He doesn't think, "I'm going to go ahead and swing away." No, he thinks, "I've been told to sacrifice, and I'm going to sacrifice."

There is a prayer that Methodists have said on New Year's Eve since the days of John Wesley. It's called the Wesley Covenant Prayer, as we call it now. And we say it here at St. Luke's together the first Sunday of every year. But it's a great prayer for you to say every day.

Let me read to you the first part of it: "I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee, or brought low for thee. Let me be full; let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.." (Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition). That's submission.

Here's how the passage from Philippians puts it: "And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even to death on the cross." Obedience. Submission.

Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane didn't want to go to the cross. He said, "Father, if there's any way, take this away from me. Nonetheless, not what I will but what thou wilt. Not what I want, but what you want."

So, servanthood, humility, submission -the cruciform life.

I don't know if they teach the sacrifice bunt anymore. It's not all that useful; I don't guess in Major League Baseball. They don't practice it much. But I certainly hope that we teach it to young players now. The idea that a young person can learn that the very central essence of life is to put the needs of others before yourself. To take up your cross daily and follow Jesus - that's the most important lesson of all.

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, we confess that sometimes it's hard for us to submit to your will, your purposes for our lives. We confess that we're not naturally cut to be servants, to lower ourselves, to humble ourselves. O God, forgive us, we pray that you would help us put to death that which is in our own hearts, in our own lives that turns away from you. And that you would live within us that we might have the same mind in us that is in your Son, Christ Jesus. That we would serve humbly, submitting to your will. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.*