Diamond Lessons\*

(Isa. 40:27-31; I Cor. 9:24-27)

*The Outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day:  
The score stood four to two, with but one inning more to play.  
And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,  
A sickly silence fell upon the patrons of the game.*

*A straggling few got up to go in deep despair. The rest  
Clung to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast;  
They thought, if only Casey could get but a whack at that -  
We'd put up even money, now, with Casey at the bat.*

I was a lonely nine-year-old on an isolated farm in mid-Missouri when I discovered St. Louis Cardinals’ baseball on the radio. In short order Harry Caray, the Cardinals’ radio announcer, became my best friend, a daily companion describing the exploits of Stan the Man Musial, Red Schoendienst, and Enos Slaughter.

Some childhood bonds last forever. Marilyn can attest that Cardinals’ baseball is still the wallpaper on my internal desktop, the default program running when the rest of my mind goes on holiday.

I am not alone in having sports as an important part of my reality. My son-in-law and grandsons in New Zealand have stayed up all night watching World Cup Soccer on the “telly.” Every four years the Olympics display national pride around the world. Cities, states and countries invest frightening amounts of money in stadiums and infrastructure to attract professional sports franchises. And sporting championships, such as the super bowl and NCAA basketball playoffs, attract huge television crowds.

Furthermore, archeologists and historians tell us that sporting activities have always been part of human life, perhaps even woven into mankind’s understanding of group or social identity. Our texts for this morning reflect Jewish and early Christian use of racing and boxing analogies. There is evidence that racing and other athletic events were organized into ancient Greek society.

Even locally there are examples. Have you ever heard of “chunkey?” According to Timothy Pauketat, author of *Cahokia: Ancient America’s Great City on the Mississippi* (Viking, 2009), chunkey was a sporting activity important to the Cahokian peoples, who built an immense city – as large as any European city of its time – in the eleventh and twelfth centuries on both sides of the Mississippi River near St. Louis. Chunkey seems to have evolved from a primitive game of “hoops and arrows,” and involved contestants hurling sticks at carefully constructed concave wheels crafted from special clay obtained near Thebes in Southern Illinois.

Chunkey equiptment has been found in archeological digs throughout the eastern United States, and the evidence suggests that it was used, at times, as an alternative to warfare, and as a vehicle for gambling. (Some individuals may have “sold” themselves and their families into slavery gambling on chunkey!)

Sports, then, have always been an important ingredient in human life.

*But Flynn preceded Casey, as did also Jimmy Blake,  
And the former was a lulu and the latter was a cake;  
So upon that stricken multitude grim melancholy sat,  
For there seemed but little chance of Casey's getting to the bat.*

*But Flynn let drive a single, to the wonderment of all,  
And Blake, the much despis-ed, tore the cover off the ball;  
And when the dust had lifted, and the men saw what had occurred,  
There was Jimmy safe at second and Flynn a-hugging third.*

*Then from 5,000 throats and more there rose a lusty yell;  
It rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell;  
It knocked upon the mountain and recoiled upon the flat,  
For Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat.*

“Casey at the Bat,” by Ernest Lawrence Thayer, first appeared in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1888, and has been something of an anthem for the game of baseball ever since. Its text hints at the importance of the game, even in the pre-industrial revolution era of frontier California. It also points to one of the “values” manifested in the game: hopefulness, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. “If only” has always been a baseball refrain: “If only we can get to Stan the Man;” “if only Pujols can get up to bat;” if only “Casey, mighty Casey. . . .”

There are other American values in baseball as well, of course: hard work, teamwork, and sportsmanship, as examples. We could hardly find better examples of sportsmanship than that displayed by both the umpire, Jim Joyce, and Detroit Tigers’ pitcher Armando Galarraga, in the recent incident in which Joyce deprived Galarraga of a “perfect game” with a missed call at first base. Joyce viewed videotape and apologized; while Galarraga graciously accepted the apology, saying “mistakes happen.”

There was a time when baseball was celebrated as our “national pastime,” enjoyed in one form or another by most Americans. The pace and accessibility of the game allowed participants and spectators alike to understand its intricacies: to reflect, and talk about game strategies.

But more and more people today describe the game as “too slow,” too “boring.” In fact, my daughter Anne (the mother of the soccer obsessed New Zealanders) recently suggested that football now is the “ultimate American sport: continuing violence punctuated by committee meetings.” Sadly, she may be right. But who can see what’s going on with a football player, hidden in his playing armor, his face shrouded by a helmet?

*There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place;  
There was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile on Casey's face.  
And when, responding to the cheers, he lightly doffed his hat,  
No stranger in the crowd could doubt 'twas Casey at the bat.*

*Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt;  
Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on his shirt.  
Then while the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his hip,  
Defiance gleamed in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.*

*And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through the air,  
And Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.  
Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped-  
"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one," the umpire said.*

*From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,  
Like the beating of the storm-waves on a stern and distant shore.  
"Kill him! Kill the umpire!" shouted someone on the stand;  
And its likely they'd a-killed him had not Casey raised his hand.*

We expose our kids to sports in large part to teach or reinforce important values like respect for rule and authority. “Making up the rules as you go along” may be creative, but we usually associate it with cheating. And all sports insist on acceptance of and compliance with the referee’s decisions. Life is not always fair; but life goes on, with or without fairness. Don Denkinger’s missed call at first during the sixth game of the 1985 World Series may have cost the Cardinals a championship; but St. Louis continues to thrive as a vibrant and successful community twenty-five years later.

If baseball games seem long, a baseball season can be interminable. (Just ask Marilyn!) Adding spring training and, hopefully, postseason games can extend a 162 game regular season to eight months. But there are life-lessons here as well, lessons about how to respond to the pacing of life itself. In a football season of 12 or 16 games, *every game* is critical;any loss can ruin everything. But championship baseball teams lose nearly forty percent of their games. What is important in baseball is staying focused for the long haul, and learning from the things that go wrong.

Life is also played out over a long (and indeterminate) season. No single day, or act, or decision, determines a life’s value. What is important is focusing on the long haul, and learning from the things that go wrong.

*With a smile of Christian charity great Casey's visage shone;  
He stilled the rising tumult; he bade the game go on;  
He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the spheroid flew;  
But Casey still ignored it, and the umpire said, "Strike two."*

*"Fraud!" cried the maddened thousands, and echo answered fraud;  
But one scornful look from Casey and the audience was awed.  
They saw his face grow stern and cold, they saw his muscles strain,  
And they knew that Casey wouldn't let that ball go by again.*

*The sneer is gone from Casey's lip, his teeth are clenched in hate;  
He pounds with cruel violence his bat upon the plate.  
And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,  
And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.*

*Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;  
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,  
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;  
But there is no joy in Mudville - mighty Casey has struck out.*

Yes, there is failure in baseball: the best hitters make out two out of every three times at bat. Perfection is as much a myth in the game as it is in life itself. If a person is to be successful, whether in baseball or in life, he or she must recognize, accept, and learn to live with his or her limitations. This is, I think, what “life’s wisdom” means.

If growing in wisdom is one of life’s primary purposes (and I absolutely believe that it is), then it is in fact a life-long quest. And baseball, still America’s game to me, is one very good way to do it.

Not only children learn from play. May it be so with all of us as well.

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\*Presented at Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church on July 4, 2010 by Ron Scott