

“Making the Lineup”

Psalm 16:7-11; Acts 4:1-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 11, 2014 – 4th Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

With spring our thoughts return to those things we naturally associate with this season—to the return of migrating birds, to the blooming of flowers, to taking long walks out in the warm sun. After a persistent winter of gray skies and drifting snow, our thoughts also return to something else important—baseball. We love the sights and sounds and smells of a ballpark. People’s spirits seem to brighten along with the first game of the season.

From the player’s standpoint, opening day is when everything begins in earnest. An athlete works hard to make the team, and that is his first goal; but he also aspires to play regularly. No one is content just to be a benchwarmer. He wants to get in the game and participate.

With everyone desiring to play as much as possible, it is now the manager’s job to make a lineup where his men are used to best advantage. Do you have a couple of players who are good at getting on base, then know how to run once they get there? Well, you usually put them in the number one and two slots in the batting rotation. This gives them the maximum times to score runs.

Do you have some heavy hitters who can stroke the long ball? Put them in the clean-up positions of three, four, and five. Your lighter hitters go in the bottom third of the lineup, with the pitcher batting last. The manager’s secret to success is not only in having a roster of good players, but knowing how to deploy them in the right order.

The Gospel and baseball? Now bear with me because there is a tie-in with our great American pastime and the first scripture reading today. For just like the manager who makes out his lineup, this text also emphasizes the order in which things get placed. It reads in part:

⁸ I keep the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.

The key phrase in this passage is “I keep the Lord always before me.” It could also be translated “I put the Lord first in my life.” There is no equivocating here, no chance of misunderstanding. Placement and priority are quite clear.

This psalm is one of a group of songs of confidence, along with the 23rd Psalm and half a dozen others. They remind us that even during our times of greatest trouble, there is assurance in knowing that God does not forget us. Even just recalling that God is constantly present helps to keep our daily dilemmas in perspective. Since the Lord will surely see us through, Psalm 16 becomes our song to sing as well.

Now even affirming that God is first in life does not necessarily make everyday living easy. Cleveland Amory shares this little story about a time when he was parked in a supermarket lot and a woman approached the car next to him. He says she unlocked her door and threw it open with abandon, enough so that he could hear and feel it banging forcefully into his rear door. He watched her but she never looked his way; she just went about loading her groceries into the back seat.

Amory said, "I stuck my head out and said, 'I hope the side of my car didn't scratch the paint off the corner of your door.' She stopped, leaned over, inspected the corner of the door of her automobile, straightened up, then said, 'I don't think so.' Then she drove away."

Here was a person so absorbed in herself that she couldn't even recognize the legitimate concern of another. The woman was oblivious of anything or anyone else. She was in a narrow world where only one person was important, and that was her.

We probably aren't really surprised by this story. We live in a time when a lot of people are wrapped up in themselves and where there are dozens of popular books about looking out for number one. They all say that it's OK to think primarily of yourself. They tell you to stand up for your interests and get your due. Other people are significant only as they help or hinder you in your progress through life.

Now if you spend any time on the freeway, like I do, you might come to the conclusion that lots of folks must be reading these books and taking them to heart.

It's evident when you're going above the speed limit and someone breezes by you like you're standing still. It's evident when a driver spots a narrow opening and cuts across three lanes at once without even a signal. It's evident when someone comes up behind you and flashes their lights or honks their horn to get you to speed up to 80 or to move over.

For these kind of people you and I don't count much, except when you thwart them. Beware these drivers! We've seen them often. Sometimes we've even ridden with them. They're the kind that cause accidents but wouldn't even know it because they never look in the mirror to see where they've been. And why should they? After all, others really don't count for much.

Now we may not personally subscribe to the "me first" school of driving, but there are plenty of other influences out there advising us to get ours while the getting is good. Their basic message is perfectly clear: you are much more important than anyone else. What you want, you should get. Your concern overrides all others.

Now where does God fit into this kind of picture? Well, certainly secondary. God may be there, but simply as another factor in considering what to do. At the worst, God may be used as a rationale to support what one's intentions were all along.

Sometimes even churches get this mixed up. In an attempt to be successful the human agenda can take the place of the divine agenda. Personal ideas and plans become paramount and God becomes more of a heavenly advisor than rightfully at the center of the picture.

A congregation that gets caught up in itself and forgets the needs of the rest of the world, ignoring the physical and spiritual hurts of others, practices the gospel of "us first." This is not what Christ taught.

The psalmist says, "I keep the Lord always before me" and that is surely where God belongs. It's such a simple truth but is often and easily forgotten. We can get so busy that we lose track of the order in which the important things of life ought to be placed. Our priorities can get turned around and, in the end, all our striving fails to bring us the success we hoped for. And we wonder what's wrong.

Many years ago a young man, engaged to be married, had to go on a sea voyage. Days and months passed without any word from him, for this was before modern communications. His fiancée waited for him anxiously, but without abandoning hope for his return. Some of her friends said to her, "It seems your love has forgotten you and will never come back."

The woman turned to the last letter her love had sent her. In it he swore he would remain true and faithful to her. Rereading it once again her heart suddenly became peaceful, her spirits lifted, and she continued to wait patiently for his return. Months later the man came back. One of the first things he asked her was how she managed to keep faithful for so long. She brought out his letter and said, "I kept this before me and kept reading it and I believed you."

To many people today it seems that God has gone away or is so hidden that faith is lost. But the truth is that, like the young woman, we have an important document to sustain us. By keeping the Bible nearby and turning to it regularly, we are carried through the difficult times when God may seem to be distant. It brings us assurance that the Lord is really always present, loving and caring for us.

Today's scriptures remind us that when God is placed first in our lives, everything else tends to fall into place accordingly. How well Psalm 16 put its when it concludes:

"You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your hands are pleasures forevermore."