

## "Batter Up!"

John 4:5-15; John 4:19-26

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 10, 2015 – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

I'm sorry, but it's May and I'm tired of basketball and sick of hockey. These are indoor sports and they should be played when it's ten degrees out and the snow is blowing. Besides, the NBA and the NHL have been around for more than six months now and I want to move on. Enough is enough.

It's a new season and you know what that means: it's time for baseball. We've been cooped up all winter long, and what better way to get out of our doldrums than to sit under the open sky and enjoy a true spring game. No seven-footers in cut-off pajamas running up and down a hardwood floor; just a group of players throwing a ball back and forth, and an occasional hit to make it exciting.

Now baseball isn't mentioned in the Bible *per se*, and that's a shame. Except, of course, for one place. You know where it is. Yes? How many could go right to it? Why it's in the very opening words of Genesis where it starts off by saying, "In the big inning .... "

Baseball is a game with a long tradition. I guess most everyone recalls the story of Abner Doubleday. One summer back years ago he devised its rules for play.

First he laid out the field around the geometric form of a diamond. Within this design he figured how far would the bases have to be from each other in order to move safely from one to the next, but not without challenge. He determined how distant a fence have to be from home plate to allow a batted ball to clear it, but not too often.

Baseball is a really game of numbers; three strikes, four balls, three outs, nine innings. Then there's batting averages, slugging percentage, fielding opportunities, RBIs, ERAs, stolen base ratios, and so on.

The real advantage of this game over life, though, is that it provides a precise look at a person's success. From his accumulated figures, a player can tell—in absolute terms—just how he is doing and how he stands in relation to others. He's the batting leader, or he's number twenty, or 239th. He knows he strikes out once in every eight turns at bat, or every 15 or every 30. He hits well in the clutch on average or chokes regularly with men on base. The stats show this.

But then there's a factor in baseball that's very similar to life. It's called errors. They're part of the game and also part of everyday living. In baseball, no one's perfect. The good infielder is one who makes an error only about once a week or less. Then there's all the other mistakes: wild pitches, dropped flies, getting picked off base. If the Bible doesn't talk about baseball in general, it does has a lot to say about errors and mistakes. In fact, it's filled with such references.

Back to the sport for a moment, do you know who holds the record for errors? The answer is Charles Hickman of the 1900 New York Giants. In that season he made 91 errors in 120

games as a third baseman. He booted about one in every five chances he had and his fielding percentage remains the worst for any regular player.

Now they say the problem with Hickman was that he wouldn't bend his knees so that he could get down for ground balls. They called him "Piano Legs" because his legs were always so straight. But, you see, even Piano Legs Hickman can teach us something about faith: if we would only get down on our knees a little more often, we wouldn't be prone to so many errors.

In contrast to this poor fielding is Kenny Hubbs who played second base for the Cubs during the 1960's. He set the record in that position for most games played without committing an error—87 straight. In the midst of his record-setting performance he told a reporter: "People say I have sure hands and that is why I don't make many errors. The truth is, errors are made in the head, not the hands." After the season was over he proved his point fatally by taking off in his private plane in a blinding snowstorm and losing his life. Mistakes most often are a factor of the head, or even the heart.

Well, our scripture from John today isn't about baseball. Yet, in its longer version, we have Jesus confronting a Samaritan woman who certainly seemed to be error prone. She had had five husbands and struck out five times, and was now working on number six. But here Jesus introduced her to a whole new ballgame. He told her about a different understanding of life where we are judged by faith and not by performance.

It was about noon when Jesus came upon a place known as Jacob's well. He was hot and tired from his journey. The well held out the possibility of quenching his thirst, but he had no bucket nor a rope for drawing water from so deep a well. So when he sees a woman coming along, he asks her for a drink.

Oriental courtesy called for her to respond to his request, yet she is taken aback by his dialect which identifies him as a Jew. She knew well the prejudice shown against her people. She responds, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan, so how do you ask me for a drink?" She knows some Jews would have rather thirsted than to ask a favor of a Samaritan.

"If you only knew," Jesus said, "what God gives and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would ask him and he would give you living water."

The woman looks at him skeptically for she doesn't understand what he intends. She assumes that the living water he speaks of is simply another way of saying running water. She knows the depth of the well before her and sees that the man has nothing to draw with. She asks him how he can get that living water.

Jesus points to the well. "Those who drink this water will get thirsty again, but those who drink the water that I give them will never crave further. The water I'll give will become a spring which will provide them with life-giving water and do so eternally.'

"Sir," the woman said, "give me that water."

The Samaritan woman recognizes now that this is no ordinary man before her, but some kind of prophet, a holy man. And, perhaps because of this, she reiterates one of the age-old distinctions between the Samaritans and the Jews about the central site for worship.

Jesus says to her, "Believe me, woman, the time will come when it will make no difference whether God is worshipped on this mountain or in Jerusalem. The time is coming and is already here when people will worship the Father as he really is, offering him the true worship that he wants. God is Spirit, and only by the power of the Spirit can people worship him as he really is."

The woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah will come, and when he does, he will tell us everything."

Jesus answered, "I am he, I who am talking with you," With that conversation, Jesus revealed God cares for all people and that he, himself, is the Savior sent for the world. Differences between people now take a back seat to relationship through faith. The lineup has changed.

Methodist Bishop William Willimon shares this story from when he was growing up. "There was a man in our town who was known as the town drunk, an unfortunate soul who wandered about the streets of the town inebriated. Everyone avoided him because of his foul tongue, He would curse anyone who crossed his path.

"One afternoon, while walking along the banks of a swollen stream, he slipped and fell into the raging waters. He managed to grab the branch of a tree and was seen clinging there, calling for help. A crowd gathered and watched, fearful that he would not be able to hold on much longer.

"A young man, the star player on the high school football team, threw off his coat and dove into the water. He swam to the frightened man. When he finally got to him, the man clung so tightly that the young man couldn't swim. Both of them bobbed in the water and went under. The current carried the two of them to a nearby rock, but only one of them was still breathing—the town drunk.

"'What a waste,' everyone said. 'That old drunk wasn't worth the effort,' people agreed. The thought that a brilliant, popular person should have given his life for this sort of degenerate person was beyond our comprehension."

Well, as I hear Willimon's story, I wonder if that isn't something like what happened in the crucifixion. Often we look at this event and see a good person being put to death by a group of bad people; but the fact is that Jesus substituted himself and died there for the error prone, which includes his crucifiers and which includes us as well.

A central message of the Gospel is that we are not judged finally in life by our errors, as in our games, but rather we're made acceptable through God's great love shown in Jesus Christ. What we can't do for ourselves has been done for us. God's mercy reaches out to each one of us who cannot help but commit mistakes and sin against others, and lifts us up through faith. That makes each day a whole new ballgame for us, too. The sins of yesterday may not be forgotten, but they are forgiven.

Be assured that tomorrow we can put on clean uniforms and walk back out on the field of life with renewed optimism. We are given a new chance to start play again. Instead of being crushed by sinful errors, we're reminded this morning that God's Spirit can overcome even these failings and make eventual winners out of all of us.