
Sermon

Homily from The Rev. Bill Harkins

2 September 2007

14 Pentecost²⁰⁰⁷: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15, 16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

In the name of the God of Creation, who loves us all, Amen.

Good morning and welcome to the Cathedral of St. Philip on this 14th Sunday after Pentecost. We are approaching my favorite time of year—a time when school resumes, and the pennant races are heating up, and, blessedly, one notices coolness in the air early in the morning. Vicky and I were in western North Carolina last weekend, and up in the high country the Sweet Gum trees are turning red, and the late season wildflowers are in full bloom. At my backyard bird feeders the hummingbirds are ravenous as they prepare for their long journey south for the winter. And, of course, football season is now upon us. Many among us spend Saturday and Sunday afternoons in the fall watching football. When I was growing up much of my life was centered on Saturday football games at Chastain Park, and later, all around north Georgia on Friday nights. I confess to a preference for baseball these days, but football is part of my history, and when the leaves begin to turn and the temperatures fall, it is hard to ignore.

If you journey to the north of England, to a particular playing field at the Rugby School, you can locate a marker near that field that reads as follows: "This stone commemorates the exploit of William Webb Ellis, who with a fine disregard for the rules of football as played in his time, first took the ball in his arms and ran with it, thus originating the distinctive figure of the Rugby game. A.D. 1823."

Now, the reference to football in this case is of course to the game we refer to as soccer. Much to the dismay of soccer purists, the game spread from this act of fine disregard at the Rugby School that day long ago to include 7-man, 13-man, Australian rules, and eventually the gridiron eleven-man block and tackle variant we now know as football in this country. In its distilled form, among purists, it is the game of rugby. So, what we now know as American football began with this act of rebellion, this "fine disregard for the rules," and the rest is history. This begs the question, what possessed Webb Ellis, in the heat of a soccer game on that fateful day in 1823, to pick up the ball and run with it? And, stranger still, how did this eventually result in what we now know as American football? Why didn't they just throw him out of the game and be done with it? The brilliant Art Historian Kurt Varnedoe, himself a former football and rugby player, asks these very questions in relation to the development of art history. Why is it that "somebody operating in the context of one set of rules sees that there is another way to go, and takes matters into his or her own hands; and someone else, or a lot of others, chooses to view this aberrant move, not just as failure or foul, but as the seed to a new kind of game, with its own set of rules." For Varnedoe, such questions speak to core issues in art history, such as how creativity and imagination allow new forms of artistic expression, and what happens when artistic credos degenerate into dogma. When and under what circumstances, in other words, do artists "color outside the lines" that allows for creativity, imagination, and new, generative artistic expression?

Taking a cue from art history and the origins of American football, we might ask the same questions of other art forms, such as jazz, or poetry. In hearing the Gospel text this morning, we might be curious as to theological understandings and interpretations of codes of conduct. What can we learn from Webb Ellis' fine disregard for the rules of English football that might help us with our understanding of Jesus' actions in today's Gospel? And what connections, if any, might exist

between the developments of modern art as it evolved from Manet, to Cezanne, to Seurat, to Picasso, to Pollock, on the one hand, and Jesus' response to the Pharisees who scrambled for a seat at the head of the table, on the other? Varnedoe, the art historian, is clearly interested in those developments that occur when creative artists have the courage to color outside the lines, as it were—breaking the rules, just as in his context the young Webb Ellis did in picking up the soccer ball and running with it. In such moments new and transformative possibilities arise.

In the Gospel for today, Jesus dines with a group of Pharisees on the Sabbath. As we know there is growing antagonism between Jesus and the Pharisees, especially concerning ritual observances. And, come to that, especially those rules in relation to the shared meal. It mattered much with whom, and where, one sat during the meal. The Pharisees were watching Jesus closely. There was much at stake on all sides. In verses omitted from today's reading Jesus asks the Pharisees and lawyers present whether it is unlawful to do healing work on the Sabbath. When his question is answered with silence, Jesus heals the man of his edema, and sends him on his way. He asks those gathered who among them would not rescue livestock from a ditch on a Sunday. Again, they remain silent. As our reading for today begins, Jesus tells a parable. The hosts for this dinner were accustomed to receiving the respect they believed should be accorded them by virtue of their social status. Luke tells us they "love to have the seat of honor in the synagogues," and it was their expectation that this privileged status would extend to social occasions as well. The Pharisees were watching Jesus closely because he already had a reputation for breaking the rules—a reputation, we might say, for having a fine disregard for the rules of the game. The Pharisees believed in eating Sabbath dinners with decorum and respect for the cleanliness rules of the culture. Jesus seemed to have a disdain for rules of purity and cleanliness. He ate with unclean people such as tax collectors, sinners, and lepers. The keepers of the traditional rules of the game are keeping an eye on Jesus, but he turns things upside down by watching them. He watches them scramble and scheme to take seats of highest position and honor. He watches them watch him, and one another, lest they miss an opportunity to be seen as persons of power, prestige, and position. He watches them driven by fear and arrogance to show that they know the rules, know how to keep score, know better than to color outside the lines, and know to demonstrate how very important they believe themselves to be. And then, the watcher who is being watched colors outside the lines. In what must have come as an abrupt surprise to those present, Jesus says to those assembled, "when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, and when you give a luncheon or a dinner, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." "Go ahead," he says to those keepers of the rules of the game, "break the rules, color outside the lines, pick up the ball and just run with it. Don't let the powers and principalities of the day delude you into thinking that your arrogance is justified." And that is the issue, isn't it—the hubris and arrogance that threaten to blind us to the imaginative, creative, life-giving possibilities of life lived outside the burdensome rules we observe when we seek to justify ourselves. Jesus knew that humility may indeed be the cardinal virtue of his Gospel, and with good reason: our arrogance, so often a product of what we fear, can cause us to die a slow death inside. What happens to us when we give so much energy and attention to our seat at the table, to our status in relation to those in power and those who are not, and to our own good fortune in relation to the lame, the poor, and the blind? What happens to our souls?

Many years ago, when I was a Divinity student, I spent a year at a University Children's Hospital as a chaplain intern. Vicky and I were young, and poor, and both in graduate school, and we were the parents of two young boys. Truth told most days at the hospital were terrifying for me. The children who were there were the sickest in the region, whose hometown hospitals could not treat them. I struggled to maintain my fragile objectivity while visiting the children in the hospital, talking with their worried parents. At night I held my sons close to me, even as I worried over every sniffle and cough. I imagined the worst that could happen because I was exposed to it every day. One beautiful Easter Sunday, late in my internship, I was assigned to the children's chapel at the hospital. In my arrogance borne of fear, I told myself I had better things to do, other places to be. I wanted to be home with my children, with my family, now celebrating Easter without me. Instead, I found myself in the hospital playroom, where children's chapel was held. There, one lone soul sat in a wheelchair, patiently waiting for me, the chaplain, to arrive. His name was Walter, 9 years old, and he was from Homerville, Georgia. His mother introduced him, and told me that his kidneys were failing and he was undergoing dialysis while he awaited a transplant. He reached out his hand to shake mine, and his mother, needing no doubt some blessed time to herself, went down to the cafeteria, entrusting her son to my care. In an off-handed way I suggested that we draw together, and as I scrambled for paper and crayons he calmly replied, "OK. Will you draw the animals from Noah's Ark?" I agreed, and we sat there together, juice and cookies our Easter banquet fare, me drawing the animals from the ark in an absent minded way, Walter smiling, and nodding approvingly, enthusiastically suggesting new animals in turn. All the while I was wishing to be somewhere else, worrying, if you will, about not being seated at the table where I thought I should be, worrying about my children; I was not fully present, and I was not paying attention. When Walter's mother

returned, I assured her that we had been having a marvelous time. "We've been drawing," I said, delighted with my pastoral art therapy on the fly. "Drawing?" she replied. "Walter can't draw, Chaplain. He lost his sight a year ago because of his illness. Walter is blind." Well, there it was, my own Pharisaic self-importance, exposed. But Walter, you see, unlike me, had not been afraid to color outside the lines of hospitality. He took the ball and ran with it; he gave me the seat of honor at the table, and I took it, though I did not deserve it. In the end, it was I who could not see. "Take the lowest seat," Jesus said. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Remember to show hospitality, we are told, for in so doing, we may entertain angels without knowing it. Walter, an angel in my book, in his fine disregard for my blunder, had already forgiven me. He ignored the rules, extended hospitality to me, and in so doing created a life-giving possibility in the face of my arrogance and fear. There was room for everybody at Walter's table, even a blind chaplain. The rules that would hold us in bondage are undone by our willingness to engage in creative, playful acts of hospitality, informed by the love of Christ. May it be so for each of us, my sisters and brothers, as we co-create new, imaginative, resurrection possibilities for the expression of God's grace, and the love of Christ here, and now, even if it means having a fine disregard for the rules. Amen.

Kirk Varnedoe, "A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern," Thames and Hudson, Ltd., London, 1990.

Comments? Contact Bill Harkins at: BHarkins@stphilipscathedral.org