

# BASEBALL IN THE BIBLE: THE MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

a sermon by

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*Text: "Indeed, the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever."*

*Hebrews 7:28*

For many baseball fans across this country, today is a sad day. The season is over. The St. Louis Cardinals have won the World Series. All that remains is the announcement of the recipient of baseball's most famous awards.

Some awards have already been given. The Cardinal's shortstop, David Eckstein, was named the Most Valuable Player of the World Series. In addition to this prestigious prize, Major League Baseball has given the Hank Aaron Awards (Derek Jeter, Yankees and Ryan Howard, Phillies), the Comeback Players of the Year (Jim Thome, White Sox and Nomar Garciaparra, Dodgers). Some awards are named in a shameless marketing ploy; like, for example, the DHL Delivery Man of the Year (Mariano Rivera, Yankees). Other awards speak of great humanitarian work. This year, Carlos Delgado (Mets) received the Roberto Clemente Award as the one player who best exemplified baseball, sportsmanship, community involvement and contribution to his team.

With all of these award recipients, it may be hard to believe, but there are other awards to be given. Several players – 36 to be exact – will receive a Gold Glove or a Silver Slugger. Between November 13 and 20, special events will recognize the two recipients of each of these awards: Manager of the Year, Rookie of the Year, the Cy Young Award, and, let us not forget, *the* Most Valuable Player.

It may just be me, but it seems odd to know that not one, but two, players will be acknowledged as the one most valuable player. Since 1931 an award has been given to the most valuable player in the National and American Leagues of Baseball. In 1931, the first most valuable players were Lefty Grove (Philadelphia) and Frankie Frisch (St. Louis). Since that time, 153 MVP trophies have been handed to dozens of players, each having been singled out as *the* most valuable player in baseball. In a strange turn of events – strange even by the

standards of major league baseball – three players received the 1979 MVP award; Don Baylor (California), Keith Hernandez (St. Louis), and Willie Stargell (Pittsburgh).

This sheer number of awards and recipients makes very clear that there simply is no *one* MVP.

## I.

In baseball, fans tend to celebrate success. But, baseball is actually about failure. The best hitter in baseball, Ted Williams, is revered for the time that he batted 400. That's the same thing as saying that the very best hitter in baseball, in the very best season of his life, failed to get a hit 6 out of every 10 times that he even tried. For every 5 times that he attempted to get a hit, even Ted Williams failed three times while succeeding only twice. Baseball, like life itself, cannot escape the realities of human limitations and, yes, the realities of human failure.

It is true of each one of us that we have, we do, and we will continue to fail at many of life's most important moments. We do live in a world where failure is an immutable truth. So much so, that what we celebrate as success, is often nothing more than awarding someone who failed the least. In our Christian faith, we acknowledge our failures. But, more importantly, we also acknowledge and celebrate God's successes. This dual nature of our world – a reality marked by human failure and by divine success – is very much at the heart of today's New Testament text. In our Reformed Tradition, we acknowledge that God alone is to be worshipped; and, so we begin our worship services with a hymn of praise. We also acknowledge our own sinfulness; and, so we proceed directly to our Confession of Sin and Assurance of Pardon.

John Calvin, an early and influential leader of the Protestant Reformation, begins his most famous writings with this statement, "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."

Any complete assessment of our human condition must acknowledge our failures and our limitations. Death is a universal fact of life. So too is our consistent, constant failure. In our Reformed Tradition, another reality and truth is far more important than any observation of our human frailty. That reality is the perfection of our God.

The writer of Hebrews is contrasting and distinguishing our earthly work from the heavenly work of Jesus. As for earthly ministers, we are limited by our own sinfulness and eventually by our own death. But, this is said of Jesus, "... he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." Jesus is said to be "holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens," and even "perfect for ever."

## II.

This notion of ourselves as sinful and limited, together with the idea that Jesus Christ as the sinless Son of God, is inseparable from our Christian faith. But, such ideas are not universally accepted. Throughout our world, and also our nation, many people simply deny that there is a God. To them, any statement of religious truth is by their definition a lie. Sam Harris, a self-described atheist and author of two popular books, thinks very little of anyone who claims to believe in God. To Harris, there is no difference between a belief in the living God and a belief that "Elvis is still alive" or "that the holocaust was a hoax." Sam Harris and other self-proclaimed atheists will never agree with the Christian idea that there is a God, much less the belief that we can have a relationship with the living God. On this subject, Harris has said, "The President of the United States has claimed, on more than one occasion, to be in dialogue with God. If he said that he was talking to God through his hairdryer, this would precipitate a national emergency. I fail to understand how the addition of a hairdryer makes the claim any more offensive or ridiculous."

Popular books are being written by some who deny the very existence of God. These same people will tell you that there is no one available to hear, much less to answer our prayers. Many of these books read well and

are popular because they do offer insightful, perhaps even, truthful insight into human-kind. They have something correct to say about mankind. But, even when these writings provide much knowledge of ourselves, they contribute absolutely nothing to our understanding of God.

Other writers may tell of harrowing life experiences, moments that provide insight into ourselves, and also aid our knowledge of God. In recent weeks the writings of Jill Carroll have captivated many people. You may remember that Jill was working in Iraq as a free lance writer for the Christian Science Monitor. On January 7 of this year, she was kidnapped by insurgents. After being held captive for nearly three months, Jill noted something that she had not done.

“Through all the weeks and months I hadn't prayed. I thought it would be hypocritical. All of my extended family is Catholic, but I hadn't been to church in a long time. I hadn't grown up with much religion, in fact. But I needed to calm myself. I knew that my family and friends were doing all they could for me, but it just wasn't enough anymore. They were out there, and I was here alone. OK, I thought, I'll ask God for strength and patience.”

“God, thank you for getting me through all these days so far,” I began. “Please just give me the strength to keep going.”

“Stay with my family right now and sit with them and give them strength.”

“I know I never used to come to You before and it's bad of me to come to You now when I really need it.”

“Please, just stay with me right now. Just stay with me right now and don't leave me.”

Even though God was with her – and she knew that God was with her – Jill had decided *not* to pray. Her heart-felt understanding that God was with her demonstrated her heart-felt knowledge that she has a real and great value to the living God.

But, her decision to refuse saying a prayer was rooted in her belief that she wasn't good enough to pray to God.

Something about Jill's faith was revealed in her comments about the many faithful members of her family. Jill knew instinctively that a special mass for her protection would be spoken. At times she looked at her watch and calculated the exact time that certain family members would be in church and praying for her return. The knowledge that others were praying for her provided Jill Carroll with a real sense of comfort; and, perhaps also a unique closeness to those who prayed for her.

### III.

Some would have you believe that there is no reason to believe in God. Others believe that God exists, but that we are unable, unworthy to pray to God. Such ideas are not at all new or creative.

Some 2,000 years ago the writer of Hebrews addressed the same doubts about God and similar arguments about people. Even then, the community understood that life is often marked not by our successes but by our failures. If we are unable to succeed in life, how possibly can we succeed in approaching the living God? And yet, in Hebrews we read that we are not only to approach God's throne of Grace, but that we are to do so with confidence, “that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”.

In all of recorded history, the person of Job stands out as the one, single person who has endured the greatest time of need. Job, a man of faith, suffered financial loss, life-threatening illness and the death of his family members. Horror upon horror was heaped upon this man. Adding insult to his injury was the constant refrain of others, of people described as his friends, as they questioned and tormented this man. In our Old Testament lesson, Job's anguish is heard as he cries out against the people around him.

“How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words? These ten times you have cast reproach upon me; are you not ashamed to wrong me? And even if it be true that I have erred, my error remains with myself.”

Job cries out in anguish. But, he also cried out in faith. Confronted with life’s most tragic loss, Job still speaks of his reason for hope.

“Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were graven in the rock for ever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!”

The prayer of Job reveals a great deal about his knowledge of himself, of his earthly limitations and of his own sinfulness. The prayer of Job also reveals a deep knowledge and understanding of God, that even in the face of adversity, our Redeemer lives.

This same truth about God, the fact that our Redeemer lives, is exactly the point of our text from Hebrews. In this it is said of Jesus that “he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever.” In this context, we understand that the work of Jesus is at once similar to the work of the earthly priesthood; and, at the same time something very different.

“...the high priest performs his office on earth, but Christ performs his in heaven; the high priest offered the blood of animals, but Christ offered his own blood. The high priest took the blood into the earthly sanctuary, Christ took his into heaven itself. The Levitical sacrifices covered only ritual impurity, Christ’s sacrifice took away sin, enabling worshippers to serve the living God.”

The work of Jesus is indeed similar to the work of the earthly priesthood, and, at the same time, something very, very different. Perhaps the most striking difference is the enduring nature of Jesus’ work. As one has observed, “While the Levites pass on in succession, Christ ‘remains’ (ἰΰίᾱέί). ... The absolute is striking. Christ is not said to remain a *priest* forever; he simply *remains*.”

It is said of Christ that he remains. Though the sacrifice is complete, his death and the resurrection fixed in time, there does remain the matter of the work left to be done in and throughout this world. And, so there remains work to be done by each of our hands, wherever we may be.

Many in this world, perhaps even we, look for the single Most Valuable Player. In baseball, that particular player does not exist and cannot be identified. But, in this baseball is not at all like life. In life there is one MVP. This is the one already appointed “a Son who has been made perfect for ever.” So, in every circumstance of life, we are able to have hope. We are to remain faithful to the one who gives life and faith.

END NOTES

