

BASEBALL IN THE BIBLE: THE INFIELD FLY RULE

a sermon by

The Reverend David H. Green

First Presbyterian Church
Galveston, Texas

October 8, 2006

Text: “Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the LORD, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came forth from the presence of the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD.”

Leviticus 10:1-2

It was a beautiful spring afternoon. The church softball league was in full swing. I was playing at third base on a pretty good team. Our team included several very good players. The best, by far, was Mike, our short stop. Mike grew up playing competitive ball from about the time that he began walking.

Mike was an extraordinary ballplayer. He had attended an Ivy League school on a baseball scholarship. Upon graduation, his baseball credentials earned him a try-out and eventually a minor league contract offered by the New York Yankees' organization. His academic credentials earned him a try-out and what could be called a major league contract with a fortune-500 corporation in Dallas.

For those unfamiliar with the phenomena, church league softball is an enormous amount of fun. The games are played on bumpy, weed-covered fields. Players generally have all of the equipment used by their major league favorites, and all of the skill of a seven year old kid. In fact, Church league softball is a lot like little league ball, only without all of the cursing.

I had been watching or playing baseball from the time that I was a young kid. I knew, and had seen, every scenario, every imaginable error, every great fielding set-up, and even every rule... or, so I had thought.

While playing at third base, the opposing team had a couple of base runners and no outs. The batter hit a towering, sky-scraping, cloud-kissing fly ball towards third base – to me!

As the ball began its downward re-entry from the stratosphere, I heard the unmistakable sound of the umpire's voice calling out, "The infield fly rule is in effect."

What? What did he say? In all my years of watching baseball, I had never heard of the infield fly rule! What am I supposed to do now?

I.

The Bible, like baseball, sometimes presents new, unpredictable and unexpected situations. Those moments come with little, if any, time for preparation. All too often they come with even less explanation.

Such seems to be the story in today's Old Testament lesson (Leviticus 10:1-3). When confronted with a story of a moment that is unpredictable, unexpected, and apparently unexplainable what are you to think?

The story does sound difficult to understand. A couple of guys with very strange names make a little fire; and they burn a little incense. Then, without any warning, fire comes from God and devours these poor, unsuspecting kids; and, they died right there in the presence of the LORD. Moses gives a speech; but, Aaron doesn't.

There you are. With an explanation like that, it's no wonder that people tend to think of God, as revealed in the Old Testament, as being something like a vindictive bully. But, in truth, God, as revealed in this particular story is loving and protective of His people.

Remember the story of Moses. This man, who was born a Hebrew, was adopted and raised by the Pharaoh's daughter. Eventually, God spoke to Moses and instructed him to be the leader who demanded the release of the Hebrew captives. Moses had a long list of reasons that he simply could not be the man for this particular job. Among his reasons was the fact that he, Moses, had some kind of speech impediment and was unable to do the job. God instructed Aaron, Moses' brother, to be the spokesman of the two.

As it happened, Moses was up to the job. With Aaron speaking on his behalf, Moses was able to persuade the Pharaoh to release the Hebrew people. Of course, it helped that God backed them up with the plagues; a variety of natural and not-so-natural disasters.

Not long after the people were out of Egypt and entering into the wilderness, they needed instructions to help them find their way in this new and frightening world and way of life. They also needed to know the proper procedures to use in worship. The book of Leviticus addresses the different kinds of offerings and the different reasons that they are to be presented.

The variety of offerings includes offerings to be presented when seeking forgiveness for sin, another offering when celebrating the first fruits from the field, and even another offering for peace. Some offerings are to be burned; others are not. Some offerings are to be given when you are guilty; others, when you are grateful.

II.

When people hear about the Law of God, they often reduce that phrase to the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Sinai. But, I have heard it said that the book of Leviticus includes as many as 619 different laws. Keeping up with all of this can be very confusing.

To help the people make sense of the rules related to worship, God set out a few individuals to keep track of the different kinds of offerings and the different methods used to present them to the Lord, our God. The people who were charged with this very important responsibility included Aaron who, you should remember, was Moses' brother, and Aaron's sons. Aaron's sons included two kids with very strange names – Nadab and Abihu.

Nadab and Abihu apparently weren't satisfied with the 619 laws included within the text of Leviticus. So, they made up another law, a procedure, really, and used their place in the community (as religious leaders) and the materials of the church (their scepters) to make a fire and to place an offering that was new and original.

This did not go well.

“And fire came forth from the presence of the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD.”

I should point out that the text can be read as saying that the divine intervention, the fire, was a real and physical fire that came forth from the fire used correctly in worship and consumed the lives and bodies of these young men.

The divine act of intervention can also be read to indicate that Nadab and Abihu died metaphorically in the worldly sense, but really truly “in the presence of the Lord.” That is to say that they and their earthly lives continued. But, so far as God was concerned, Nadab and Abihu were already dead in the presence, and in the eyes of the LORD.

Properly understood, the actions of God are not at all random or vindictive. As God set out the 600 or more laws, many were intended for the protection of the people and of their community. Remember that the people were created by God. The community was gathered by God. Many generations earlier, God spoke to Abraham and established a lasting covenant. Said the Lord:

“Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

The Lord said, “I will be their God.”

When Moses was first summoned to the task of leading the Hebrew people out of their bondage, the voice of God spoke these words:

“I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey....”

The Lord spoke of the Hebrew people, calling them “my people.” The Lord God created a lasting covenant. Some 400 years later, the Lord God was making good on a promise. In that context, God, and only God, has the authority to establish laws that relate to the worship life of the community.

Nadab and Abihu made up a new law all on their own. In so doing they had stepped beyond their God-given responsibilities and into the domain that belongs to God, and to God alone.

The divine response was, in fact, quite severe.

“And fire came forth from the presence of the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD.”

This divine act did serve to punish Nadab and Abihu for their actions. But, it is equally true that this divine response also served to protect the people of the community from corrupt, self-centered, and badly misguided leaders.

Those two men, Nadab and Abihu, set-out to bring glory to themselves. But, God would have nothing to do with that. And so Moses said to Aaron (not to the people, but to Aaron), “This is what the LORD has said, ‘I will show myself holy among those who are near me, and before all the people I will be glorified.’”

III.

What sounded so difficult to understand really is quite simple.

- Two religious leaders set out to bring glory to their own selves and not to God.
- God acted to protect his people from these badly misguided individuals.
- End of story.

When told like that, the story really is pretty simple to understand.

That brings me back to my baseball game and that fly ball. I was playing third base and the opposing team had a couple of base runners and no outs. The batter hit a towering, sky-scraping, cloud-kissing fly ball towards third base – to me!

As the ball began its downward reentry from the stratosphere, I heard the unmistakable sound of the umpire's voice calling out, "The infield fly rule is in effect."

What? What did he say? In all my years of watching baseball, I had never heard of the infield fly rule!

I called out to Mike, the short stop that had played college ball, "What's the Infield Fly Rule? What am I supposed to do now?"

He laughed and said, "Catch the ball." And I did.

I later learned that the infield fly rule simply means that the batter is out; regardless of whether or not the ball is caught. This rule exists to keep an infielder from dropping a simple fly ball in an attempt to get two or maybe even three outs instead of one.

I didn't recognize the rule. But that didn't change what I was supposed to do.

All too often we get caught up in discussions and distractions that really shouldn't matter. When President Harry Truman was leaving office, only 32% of Americans approved of his job performance, and 43% thought it a mistake to go to war in Korea. Of this Moment, David McCullough wrote:

"Polls meant no more to him [President Truman] now than ever before. 'I wondered how far Moses would have gone if he had taken a poll in Egypt?' he wrote privately in an undated memo to himself. 'What would Jesus Christ have preached if he had taken a poll in Israel?' It isn't polls or public opinion of the moment that counts, it's right and wrong.'"

It happens to the best of us. In fact, it happens to all of us. At one time or another, we get distracted by the peripheral issues, situations and rules. We lose sight of what truly is important. We forget about what is right or wrong. It is easy for us to be distracted by something that we don't understand, or by something else that we don't like. There are plenty of distractions at any given moment. Our job is to set all of that aside and to remember, at its most simple description, what we are supposed to be doing. All that we need to worry about is what's right and what's wrong.

Today each one of us will have an opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Communion. Individually and together, we are to reach out with our hands – hands of varying size, shape, color, age and ability – to receive this bread of life. Though our many hands may look different, each and every one of our hands will reach up and touch the hand of God. That's the hand – the very hand of God – that holds us together.

IV.

All of this highlights the importance of an effective educational ministry in the life of the church.

In our worship services, there is very little that can be done to teach the fullness and the richness of God's word. For example, this morning I have addressed only one of the more than 600 laws and rules set out in the Old Testament. If I were to continue preaching every week with a sermon on each of these laws, this series of sermons would continue until about February – in the year 2022.

There must be a place in the life of every congregation where people can study the Bible; where we can learn of our Reformed Tradition; and, where we can find lessons of our faith as it applies to our contemporary setting.

There must also be a place in the life of every congregation where people can meet in smaller, more comfortable settings; where the size of the congregation is reduced from the hundreds of names that appear on our membership rolls, to a handful of people who become important friends.

Finally, there must be a place in every congregation where people can be given opportunity to become Christian leaders. The development of future leaders requires a place where leadership abilities can be identified and discerned by the congregation; and where these same leadership abilities can be strengthened.

Study, Community, and Opportunity; these are the hallmarks of an effective educational ministry.

In many churches, there are a few common misperceptions about an educational ministry.

One such misperception is the belief that smaller congregations necessarily provide a lower quality of educational opportunity. The simple truth is quite different. Smaller congregations do provide a different *kind* of educational ministry. In our church, our size allows us to develop strong and lasting relationships. Here people are valued because of who you are – a child of God.

A second common misperception about educational ministries is rooted in the notion that programs will be added *after* new people show up at the church. The truth of this idea is that, as a model for church growth, it simply can not succeed. This idea is comparable to opening a restaurant with little food and with no menu; but with the idea that these can be added *after* future patrons become committed to the life and future of the restaurant.

In honesty, I must acknowledge that there are a few – very few – churches where suburban growth has brought people to the door of the church. Of those churches, precious few have added programs to accommodate the outsiders that broke through the doors of the church. Far from being welcomed, those new arrivals are often blamed for changing the nature of the congregation, for unraveling the old church that was so dearly loved.

A strong and effective educational ministry is essential to the life and future of any congregation. A strong and effective educational ministry is also essential to the very life of our future generations. There are many rules in baseball, in the Bible and in life. Christian education provides an opportunity for these rules to be taught and to be learned.

If the rules of life cannot be learned in the church, then where are people to go?