

“Church Is a Team Sport”

November 16, 2008

Acts 2:1–21, 37–45

Take a look at this:

As you most certainly know, that was Michael Jordan, arguably the best player to ever play the game of basketball. A player so completely dominating that as you saw in the clip, no less than Larry “Legend” Bird of the Boston Celtics referred to Michael as *“God in basketball sneakers.”* Michael Jordan was a 6 time NBA champion, 5 time league most valuable player, and 14 time NBA All Star. There can be no doubt that Michael was one of the most talented individuals ever to play the game. However, before he rose to those dizzying heights of total basketball domination, there was one simple lesson that this talented young man needed to learn. When Michael arrived at the University of North Carolina to begin his college career, his coach, Dean Smith, greeted him with 8 simple words that summed up the lesson that all basketball players, no matter how talented, need to learn if they want to succeed. What Coach Smith told him was this, *“Michael, if you can’t pass, you can’t play.”*

What Smith was teaching Jordan in a not-so-subtle way was that basketball is a team sport, and that in order for any team to succeed, every single player on that team will need to put the goals of that team ahead of one’s own needs and desires, including Michael Jordan.

Another basketball coach who clearly understands and teaches the importance of total commitment to team is Coach Doc Rivers of the Boston Celtics. Last year, after 22 years of mediocrity, Rivers led the Celtics to their 17th NBA championship. At the start of the season, after the Celts had ended up in last place the previous year, Rivers believed that the team needed a *“community”* mantra for the 2007–2008 season to help meld together old timers like Capt. Paul Pierce with hot-scoring newcomers Kevin Garnett and Ray Allen. And so, in the big ego, huge money environment of the NBA, Coach Rivers began to teach his team the power of *“Ubuntu.”* Do any of you know what that means? Ubuntu is an African term that can loosely be interpreted as *“Collective success over individual achievement.”* In other words, Rivers was telling this group of self-important multi-millionaire superstars that they needed to put team before self.

By the beginning of the season that team was chanting “Ubuntu” before every game before breaking their huddle, and by the end of the season, their one-year turnaround from worst to first was the greatest in NBA history. Ubuntu worked for the Celtics because as we said before, basketball is a team sport.

But basketball isn’t the only environment in which this spirit of Ubuntu is essential. For as we read in this morning’s lesson from Acts chapter 2 and the birth of the Christian Church, what we find is the spirit of God and the spirit of Ubuntu running wild. Just listen once again to this powerful description of those first century believers who were so amazingly able to put the needs of others before their own personal desires. Beginning in verse 43, Luke wrote, *“And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”*
[Acts 2:43–47]

The formula for their success is obvious. First there is what they did. They lived together, they ate together, they prayed together, they worshipped together, they sold everything that they had and shared everything that they had ever owned in this world together, and then together, they gave it away to anyone who was in need. And secondly there is why they did it. Why were they so selfless, so loving, and so frighteningly generous? Look again to Luke’s words: The church in Jerusalem did all this *“with glad and generous hearts praising God and having favor with all the people.”*

You see, the purpose of all that loving, sharing, giving, and fellowship wasn’t so that they could create a nice little club and cut down on expenses. They did all that they did to praise God and draw others’ attention to God’s love. THAT my friends is Ubuntu, that is community, that is the spirit of God alive and active in a group of people, that is church.

Like Nancy’s color wheel on the wall here behind me. The church in Jerusalem took all that they were, and all that they had, and all that they wanted, and all that they dreamed; they took different people with different backgrounds, and different ethnicities, and different vocations, and different

languages, and different theologies, and they blended them all together to offer love and praise to God.

And in that blending together of such a variety of colors of expression, they found such a spirit of unity that they spoke together in one language and had complete understanding. And that language of love and generosity and hope and caring spoke so loudly that people from all around came to Jerusalem not just to see, but to join in and be a part of what was going on.

Many teams, one target—that's the theme of our stewardship campaign. It's a powerful reminder that although we are many people, each one of us unique and individual, in the church, as part of the Body of Christ on earth, we are called, like that church in Jerusalem, to take all that we are and all that we have and all that we desire and offer it up to God, allowing the God who created us with a purpose to blend us together in a beautiful palate of grace, generosity, and love that will call all people to the light of Christ that shines forth from us.

Christ and us—we are the church. And as a book that Millie Simon loaned me a while back reminds us all, ***“Church Is a Team Sport.”*** Here's how the author Jim Putnam describes it, *“God wants his team to work together for His glory. Teamwork is essential to winning, and I believe that church really is a team sport. Each believer has a function that is essential to the success of the mission. We must be unified to win, just as a team of talented individuals cannot win without teamwork.”*

“Michael, if you can't pass, you can't play.” “Ubuntu.” “And all who believed were together and had all things in common.” It's all the same, in sports, life, and the church, God needs us, and we need each other giving all that we have to the common goal of giving glory to God and shining the light of Christ on our hurting world if we want to succeed and excel, because as we see so clearly demonstrated from the life and ministry our forefathers and mothers from the Book of Acts, Church really is a team sport. And every single one of us is a member of that team. Amen.