

“Play Until the Whistle Blows”

Luke 18: 1-8

October 21, 2007

“What does one do when one has one’s heart broken?” That is a question that I asked in an article that I was asked to write for the Norwich Bulletin a little less than a year ago. The article was a kind of op/ed piece about the special significance that the then recently released movie *“We Are Marshall”* holds for me.

In the article I described how on November 14, 1970, the worst tragedy in the history of Collegiate athletics took place in my hometown, Huntington, WV. Our beloved Marshall University Thundering Herd football team was flying home from a game in Greenville, North Carolina when their airplane smashed into a hillside moments before their scheduled landing at Tri-State airport. The entire Marshall football team, save for a couple of injured players and one coach, were on that plane. Also on the airplane were a number of prominent Huntington doctors, businessmen, civic leaders, and their spouses. In all there were 75 people on that plane. There were no survivors.

To say that the city of Huntington had it’s heart broken that night would be an understatement. The relationship between the university and the town was and is symbiotic. It’s hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. And so when that plane went down, a part of Huntington went down with it. In the days and weeks following that crash, in the midst of dozens of funerals and city-wide memorial services for the lives that were lost, there was also discussion about ending the football program. After all how can you field a football team without players, coaches, and many of their most ardent supporters? The obstacles were many and huge. The pain was tremendous, nearly unbearable. The thinking among many, concerning the numerous obstacles that stood in the way of resurrecting the football program was that it was time to give up.

Hence my question, “*What does one do when one’s heart is broken?*” It’s an important question. One that goes far beyond football and airplane crashes. It’s a question that keeps us awake at night and gnaws at the heart of our faith. After all, I feel certain that there’s not one person here this morning that doesn’t have a story like mine. There’s not a man, woman or child walking the face of this planet that hasn’t, or won’t have to look the debilitating pain of devastating loss in the eye and come to some decision as to how to how one is going to carry on on the other side of that pain. Illness, the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, divorce, fractured relationships the pressures of busy families and a high octane life style, they all collide together in a quagmire of pain and grief that threatens to do us in. The sheer volume of prayer requests that are shared in this sanctuary every single Sunday morning bears testimony to the reality of the truth that the devastating pain of loss is an unavoidable circumstance of life on planet earth. “*What does one do when one’s heart is broken?*”

Our answer comes from Jesus’ words as recorded in Luke’s gospel that we read this morning. They are words of utter importance to our living of life on this broken planet because they form the foundation of our faith in the face of the adversity that surrounds us. Luke wrote, “*And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.*” And then he goes on to share a parable of a persistent widow who convinces an unjust judge to show her mercy. Jesus point was, if this unjust judge will show mercy to this persistent woman, won’t our loving Father much more offer mercy and care to those who come to him in persistent and heartfelt prayer.

What does one do when one’s heart is broken? “They ought always to pray and not lose heart.” Now one of the problems with this passage is that some interpret it to mean that if we pray with great enough persistence and a powerful faith God will grant our every wish give and take away our every pain and problem. This way of interpreting Jesus’ words suggests that if we pray hard enough, the sick will always get well, the wayward child or spouse will always return home, and the pile of bills will magically disappear.

But the truth is that neither God, nor God's word ever make that promise. What Jesus says is "*Will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily.*" Luke 18: 7-8 At the heart of the passage is this word vindicate, which basically means to defend or to justify. So what does it mean for God to vindicate his children in the face of undue suffering and adversity? It means that God will always and forever offer strength and the ability to overcome any obstacle to the joy and peace that God desires for us that might get in our way. In other words, prayer won't remove our problems, but it will grant us the faith and strength to get through them. You see, the reality is that if we stick with God, if we remain persistent in prayer, if we keep the faith, things will change for the better with time.

Thankfully, back in my hometown they decided to continue the football program. They brought in a new coach named Jack Lengyl who recruited an entirely new team made up of freshmen and walk-on athletes from every other varsity sport on campus. In "*We Are Marshall*" there is a pivotal scene where coach Lengyl, played by Matthew McConaughey, finds Red Dawson, the one coach who missed that fateful flight, dealing with his pain in the campus chapel on the eve of the first home game of the season. His kind and wise words offer us all a glimpse of what can happen when one refuses to give up. (show scene 1:34:10-1:36:54)

And coach Lengyl was right. My mom, dad and I watched from the front row on the 35 yard line that year as Marshall posted a woeful 2-8 won loss record. In fact, during the decade of the 1970's no other team in all of college football lost more games than Marshall University. Their wildest dreams didn't come true, they didn't dominate their opponents and their dead comrades didn't raise from the dead. They weren't capable of that. But instead they did what they could do, they took the field week after week and gave it everything that they had. Yes, no team lost more games than Marshall in the 70's. However, no team in the country won more games in the 1990's than Marshall University's Thundering Herd. And that is a testimony to the power of persistence that was taught to a group of young men in 1971 when their coach encouraged them to play as hard as hard as they could until the whistle blew.

There is an apocryphal story about the late British Prime Minister Winston Churchill that suggests that near the end of WWII he made a speech to the faculty and students of his old school which consisted of only 17 words. As the story goes, when it came time for him to speak, he stood up and said, *'Young men, never give up. Never give up! Never give up!! Never, never, never-never-never-never!'*"

Churchill's apocryphal speech to the citizens of that nation that was enduring nightly bombings and the very real threat of a German invasion is the same message that was offered by Jesus, Luke and Jack Lengyll as well. Never give up. Never give in. Never quit. Never stop trying. Never stop believing. Never stop praying. Never stop giving it everything that you've got. Because for you and me in the game of life, everyday is game day, and it's time to play 'til the whistle blows.
Amen.

Benediction 1:38:14-1:38:46