

WHY GOD IS A BASEBALL FAN  
REV. DON ROLLINS  
SEPTEMBER 25, 2005

Friends, neighbors and fellow fans, we gather on the cusp of baseball's holiest month, October, to pay homage to the greatest game of them all. Not a believer? Take heart! Like Unitarian Universalism, there is no theological test to be a member of the Church of Baseball. But, there are certain characteristics that distinguish the faithful from the mildly interested. For example...

If you grow silent and genuflect whenever you pass a ball diamond, be it an ornate big league cathedral or a simple roadside chapel, you may be a baseball fan. If you not only purchase the MLB package for your satellite, you'll eagerly swear to anybody who'll listen that it's the best \$150 a human being can ever spend, you may be a baseball fan. If you chew your nails while watching a Pee Wee League game , you may be a baseball fan. If you send your favorite ticket scalper a Christmas card and C Note, you may be a baseball fan. If, each early April, you contract a one-day flu bug so virulent that you simply *must* protect your co-workers by staying home - and would gladly swear on your mother's Bible that it has nothing to do with Opening Day - you may be a baseball fan. And if you're about to have major surgery, and when presented with the admission form, you write "Baseball" in the blank that says "Religion", you may be a baseball fan.

I consider myself a baseball fan. So devoted a fan am I that if, on a hot and sticky day, I close my eyes for a few moments, I can still feel the scratchy and suffocating wool of my ill-fitting first Little League uniform. With some added concentration I can even smell the saddle oil I so lovingly applied to my first glove, certain that I would use it to rob an opposing hitter of a sure single from my center field position. And,

## 2.

although decidedly less pleasurable to ponder, I can still recall the time when toothless Beanie Davis called me out after banging a triple off the left field fence at the Oak View Elementary School ball diamond – a triple that should in no way be diminished one whit by two indisputable facts: a. that it was hit off a tee rather than live pitching, and b. I (honest-to-God) ran the bases in reverse. Indeed, as far I know I am the only human being to ever hit a reverse triple!

Despite that somewhat confusing early episode with the sport, baseball has always been for me God's game; surely the formula for such creativity within the boundaries of such ingenious rules could not have originated without a divine spark. Credit Abner Doubleday (who, by the way, served as a Union officer during the Civil War) with the details, but it's obvious to me that the grand scheme of baseball has God's fingerprints all over it.

It's not that I don't enjoy other sports, I certainly do. But football is primarily about bulk and strength and speed. Let's call it what it is; it's controlled violence. And basketball is primarily about height and jumping ability and quickness. Let's call it what it is; it's simple action and reaction. Hockey, soccer, tennis, golf, volleyball, swimming, bicycling – they all have their good points, but baseball is more than a sport; it's a *teacher*.

You've heard it said before, but let me say it again: baseball is a metaphor for life. Metaphors, sports-related or otherwise, function to teach us about something else. They invite us to look at that something else through a lens that is more familiar and

### 3.

less threatening than looking at it head-on. Sure, I like baseball for the diversion it was designed to provide, but I also enjoy it for the way it encapsulates life's unpredictability in spite of its routines, its rewards in spite of the constant possibility of failure, it's potential for making heroes of goats and goats of heroes.

So, if you're put off by my zeal as I talk about my favorite sport, let me further alienate you by saying that I'm deadly serious with my contention that God is indeed a baseball fan. (But let me also temper that bold statement by reminding you that I believe God to be an *experience*, not an actual entity, and certainly not a supernatural entity.) When I say that God is a baseball fan, I'm saying that there is a creative element at work in the game of baseball, so much so that it may be more accurate to say that God is a *participant* in the game of baseball – less an entity that simply witnesses the game than a *catalytic agent within the game itself*. Thus in my world, God is not simply known by such things as love, creativity, humility and effort; for me, God *is* such things as love, creativity, humility and effort.

The rest of this sermon will be given to anecdotal observations from others regarding God and baseball. Know in advance that I accept that not everyone finds the holy in the Grand Old Game, nor am I trying to say that the holy isn't present when your precious Vikings take the field. The point to keep in mind is that if God can be understood as a human experience in lieu of the popular and orthodox deity, then God can be manifest in all aspects of our lives. Especially baseball.

From the National Public Radio's program, "Speaking of Faith" comes a tale that may or may not have happened, but is nonetheless insightful and pertinent:

4.

*There is a story about Reinhold Niebuhr, the American-born theologian, taking a fellow theologian, Paul Tillich, who was a recent immigrant from Germany, to a baseball game. After several innings Tillich was still having trouble getting the knack of the game. As play progressed, an impressive “twin killing” or double play was started by the shortstop on the home team. Fans throughout the stands roared with approval and applause. Puzzled by such an overwhelming response to a play that had not seen the ball hit over the fence nor even far enough to score a base-runner, Tillich sought an explanation from Niebuhr.*

*Failing to communicate the significance of the event in understandable baseball terms, Niebuhr finally said, “It’s a kairos, Paulus, it’s a kairos.” With that explanation, Tillich understood. (For Tillich, kairos was a category of time and history that marks turning points, occasions of depth rather than events continuing the normal chronometric measure of time.)*

*Although the story in its present form might be embellished or even apocryphal...it adequately encapsulates the way in which a heroic event in baseball is sometimes seen as an event wherein a larger force than life is present, an event wherein the course of events is transformed by the nature of the event itself.*

Folks, that’s a fancy way of saying that baseball can indeed be understood as a chance for what some religious liberals call the “God experience”, that interruption of normal (*chronos*) time with sacred (*kairos*) time. Witness the well-pitched game, the saving catch or the back-to-back-to-back home runs. All that is required is our willingness to see in sports the job well done and the moment seized.

5.

God is a baseball fan because, when appreciated for what it is and what it may include, a baseball game is sacred time. It's also a bridge.

From poet Donald Hall's book, *Fathers Playing Catch with Sons: Essays on Sport (Mostly Baseball)*:

*Baseball connects American males with one another, not only through bleacher friendships and neighbor loyalties, not only through barroom fights, but most importantly through generations. When you are small you may not discuss politics or union dues or profit margins with your father's cigar-smoking friends when your father has gone out for a six-pack; but you may discuss baseball. It is all you have in common, because your father's friend does not wish to discuss the Assistant Principle or Alice Bisbee Morgan. About the season's moment you know as much as he does; both of you shake your head over Lefty's wildness or the rookie who was called out last Saturday when he tried to steal home with two out in the ninth inning down by one.*

Hall rightly admits here that sports is a bond for many men. By no means am I suggesting that sports is the only or best avenue for bonding among opposing digit-equipped males, but it surely is a popular one. Speaking anecdotally, I have made relatives who have hunted together for years and have thereby forged deep friendships. That's also true for the three generations that fish together, winter, spring, summer and fall. Ask them if there is anything "spiritual" about their obvious camaraderie and they'll guffaw; but I hear in their stories and see in their eyes a companionship that is every bit as valid as those forged in churches or lecture halls.

6.

Furthermore, whether you consider it a good thing or a further erosion of Western culture, bonding around sports is in no way an exclusively male phenomenon; for better or worse, sports-induced tribalism in modern North America knows no gender so long as the person identifies with “us” and not “them”. Where is God in these high-fiving, chest-banging, “godless” rituals, you ask? Comes a question in answer to your question: do you think God is present only in hallowed silence or meditation or colorful sunsets? The God who attends baseball games is heard in the groans and cheers of the faithful. The God who attends baseball games is present on a clear afternoon as the cityscape frames the park like a perfect postcard. And the God who attends baseball games transforms overpriced food and drink into wafer and wine as precious as that in any European cathedral.

Where is God at a baseball game? If the crowd is too far a stretch, look at the players. New York’s former governor and serious baseball fan, Mario Cuomo, put it this way:

*[Baseball] is a community activity. You need all nine people helping one another. I love the bunt plays...I love the idea of the sacrifice; even the word is good. Giving yourself up for the good of the whole. That’s Jeremiah. That’s thousands of years of wisdom. You find your own good in the good of the whole. You find your own individual fulfillment in the success of the community. The Bible tried to do that and didn’t teach you; baseball did.*

God is a baseball fan because baseball has the potential to bind us with the game, the players and one another.

## 7.

Last Thursday evening, my playoff-bound Cleveland Indians were hosting the divisional basement-dwelling Kansas City Royals. Cleveland's left fielder is an amiable, if somewhat squirrely fellow. But despite his considerable skills, he is also doubly burdened, for in addition to having the unfortunate name, Coco Crisp, he's barely 5'10" and is listed as an optimistic 180 pounds. And while his size strikes fear in the heart of nary a pitcher, Coco looked positively emaciated that evening when facing young Andrew Sisco, the Royals' 6'10", 270-pound fireball pitcher. Yet, Coco, on an 0-2 count, deposited young Sisco's pitch over the wall in right-center. Talk about your David and Goliath! Talk about God (Equality) at work!

God – the experience, mind you, not the divine string-puller – has long been in the business of equality, using even the game of baseball to level the proverbial playing field of life. Consider the epic struggles to create the players' and umpires' unions, preventing owners from exploiting those who take the field and make the calls. Consider the contribution that Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby and Walter Alston made to the entire nation when they combined to use baseball as a platform for racial justice. Consider the international flavor of professional baseball that is nearly nonexistent in football and in its nascent stages in basketball – that mix of Latin, Caucasian, Asian and other foreign-born nationals that populate the minor and major leagues. Consider the economic and social opportunities afforded those from the developing world whose talent rises to the level of the major leagues.

Whether you're a marginal player on a high school team in quest of a partial college scholarship or an impoverished refugee from Cuba determined to make a big league club, baseball still affords the marginalized a shot at something better. In a sports

## 8.

world where brawn is often king, baseball still honors brains and hard work. While we probably should stop short of endorsing former major leaguer John Kruk's observation that baseball players and athletes are not necessarily the same thing, it's true that there is room in baseball for those who can't reverse dunk a basketball or throw a sixty-yard touchdown pass.

God is a baseball fan, in part, because baseball still has room for a Coco Crisp.

I deleted from this talk several other quotes about baseball, some having to do with tradition and history and nostalgia, like Lou Gehrig's heartbreaking final words to the Yankee fans. Then too, there were the quotes from popular baseball films: "If you build it, they will come" and "There's no crying in baseball!" And in the interest of honesty, I confess that I've omitted much of anything about the underside of professional baseball – the episodic scandals, the arrogance of some owners and players, the greed, the steroids and the unyielding obsession with which some fans view what is essentially a kid's game. To be sure, modern professional baseball is a business, complete with its excesses, glaring faults, nasty characters, checkered past and mascots that are patently racist and should be retired immediately.

Yet, for all its considerable faults, there will always be those of us who see in baseball's machinations the imprint of the holy. Borrowing from writers Joe Price and Michael Novak, we'll always see a game as one chapter in a sacred story. We'll always see the mound and think of it as a cosmic mountain. We'll always see the World Series as a pilgrimage. And we'll always be suckers for a game that encourages "creativity and happenstance within order."



Finally, from the film “Bull Durham”, hear the words of Susan Sarandon’s southern temptress-turned-team owner, Annie Savoy. They ring like a Sunday morning testimony for the hardcore among us – the ones who believe that God is as rabid a fan as ourselves:

*I believe in the church of baseball. I’ve tried all the major religions and most of the minor ones. I’ve worshipped Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, trees, mushrooms and Isadora Duncan. I know things. For instance, there are 108 beads in a Catholic rosary and there are 108 stitches in a baseball. When I learned that, I gave Jesus a chance. But it just didn’t work out between us. The Lord laid too much guilt on me. I prefer metaphysics to theology. You see there’s no guilt in baseball...I’ve tried ‘em all, I really have, and the only church that truly feeds the soul – day in, day out is the church of baseball.*

I say amen, and again, amen.