

## What Makes Sunday Super

II Timothy 4:7-8, Hebrews 12:1-3

February 6, 2011

This has been a disappointing week for Dallas in some ways. For over two years now—ever since the stadium fondly known as Jerryworld opened—the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex has been anticipating Superbowl 45 and the opportunity to host one of the largest publicized events in the nation!

Of course, disappointment #1 happened when the Cowboys weren't the ones to make it to the Superbowl. To add insult to injury, the two teams that did make it to the Superbowl are not favorites with Dallasites—The GreenBay Packers and the historically detested Pittsburgh Steelers.

But worst of all, instead of the media hype over the pre-game festivities that usually accompanies the Superbowl, our focus has been the weather. The only time I can remember our city being locked down like we have this last week was the winter of 1980—which I remember as much worse because the ice really did a number on power lines that year, and we were without heat for several days. Now there may have been another more recent winter weather event in Dallas that would rival both the winters of 1980 and 2011, but I was probably in sunny Tucson, AZ at the time and didn't have to worry about it.

For all those who have been planning for this event, the disappointment over lost publicity, depleted attendance at all the parties and lost revenue must be huge.

While discussing this disappointment in recent days, a comment was made to me that made me stop and ponder. The comment was: maybe this is God's little way of reminding us who's in charge and what's most important in life.

Now, do I think God pointed a divine finger at north Texas and freeze-blasted us? No. 'Tis the season for this kind of thing. You may remember we had snow almost exactly a year ago to the week! I remember because I was supposed to drive over for our annual Minister's Week events at TCU last year, and I chose to stay home and not brave the icy roads. This year's Minister's week starts on

Monday, and wouldn't you know, another winter storm is forecasted for Wednesday.

Therefore, in no way do I think the bad weather is a "curse" on the parts of this event that brings out the worst in human nature—from greed to the perverted lust of pedophilia that I had no idea until pre-game hype shared the numbers of children in the sex trade that are transported to Super Bowl sites.

However, I do I think that the weather is a good reminder to us all about what really is important in life, and I wonder--does it really take a football game for us to remember that Sunday in and of itself is Super?

And I also wonder, have we begun to create a golden calf out of the day—to liturgize a sporting event—complete with choirs (Maroon 5 and the Black-eyes Peas, as well as soloists Keith Urban, Christina Aguilar, and Usher)?

Now I know I'm one to talk—the one who constantly wrestles with the separation of sports and religion when it comes to a certain university adorned in purple and white.

Still, the fact that this is Superbowl Sunday and it is being hosted in our hometown offers us a rare opportunity to consider the relationship between faith and sports, and the balance between the two.

What does the Bible say about sports, I wondered? So I began to dig a little.

Of course, we've all heard the old joke that one of the first scriptures in the Bible is a reference to sports—found in Genesis 1:1, which reads—for some—  
"In the Big Inning...."

Many of our modern-day sports do have their roots in the ancient world of the Bible—arising not so much out of leisure-time activities, but from the very serious business of war. The wrestling mentioned in Genesis 32 between Jacob and the angel refers more to hand-to-hand combat than to a fun contest.

Archery, javelin and sling-shot throwing were all dual-purpose activities for hunting and for warfare.

Of course, fishing was a profession in the ancient world, as it is now. But we also know that there was probably a great deal of competition (fun and otherwise) between the fishermen to see whose catch was the largest of the day.

Then there's a reference to that spherical object, the tool of the sports trade for many of our most popular games, like tennis or ping pong, soccer, football, baseball, or basketball. The first reference we hear of the much valued "ball" is found in Isaiah 22:17, when the prophet is confronting corrupt government officials, saying, "The Lord is about to hurl you away violently, my fellows. He will seize firm hold on you, whirl you round and round and throw you like a ball into a wide land."

\*You might be interested to note that the balls in Israel may have been made like those excavated in Egypt, made of leather or skin stuffed with bran or husks of corn—like our football--or of string and rushes covered with leather—more like our baseball.

Most likely from the dawn of human existence, sports have played a part of human culture and interaction. As nomadic tribes settled into communities that grew into towns and city-states, there was a need for some kind of recreation to satisfy the aggression of both men and women during peace-time and to keep warriors fit for battle.

The ancient cultures who turned sport into an art were, of course, the Greeks and later Romans, whose gymnasiums and stadiums were the precursors to our own gymnasiums and stadiums—centers for exercise and for leisure competitive battles.

Throughout the New Testament we hear references to the sports that were popularized in those arenas:

- 1) Beast fights—to which Paul alludes in I Corinthians 15:32 when he says, "What do I gain, if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus?"

- 2) Boxing—to which Paul alludes in I Corinthians 9:26 when he writes, “Well, I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.”
- 3) Foot racing—a reference found just a few verses earlier in I Corinthians 9:24-25—“Do you not know that in a race all runners compete, but only one wins the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath—but--- we an imperishable.”

And one more interesting sports reference from the Apostle Paul found in his letter to the Philippians, chapter 3:13-14, when he says, “Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ.”

What I never knew until I did this research was that in every Greco-roman stadium was a square pillar at the end of the stadium opposite the entrance which the athlete, upon entering, as far as possible kept in view, because if he made it there after dealing with obstacles like other gladiators or wild animals and the like—if he made it there without dying, he would “win” whatever prize (his life?) was offered.

The heir of that particular sport which has no real name will be viewed by millions this evening, when two teams will press on toward their respective goals and the prize of the Superbowl trophy that goes along with it.

So you see, there are plenty of references to sports in both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures to let us know that there is nothing inherently wrong or sinful or evil about competition.

Where the damage is done, of course, is when we confuse leisure sports with warfare itself—when we make real enemies of those who are fans of opposing teams. We may laugh at the intensity of those who become rabid over the Texas/Oklahoma rivalry, or the annual drama that occurs when Texas and A&M meet on Thanksgiving weekend. But the truth is that there are some who take the game to a level where friendships are determined and civility offered or taken away.

Where the damage is also done, of course, is when we forget that the competition on Friday night, or Saturday morning, or Sunday afternoon, is not the most important thing in the world on that day.

The apostle Paul was someone who obviously enjoyed the athletic competitions of his day and used them as parables for the greater call of God to live life fully. Both of our scriptures read today show how Paul used sports as metaphors for other aspects of life—not as the sole/soul focus of life.

Did you hear how he illustrated his understanding of his life's priority by using a sports metaphor for his young ministerial intern, Timothy, in today's scripture: Hear again from II Timothy 4 as the apostle reflected on the end of his life, saying, " I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge will award me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."

Paul understood that the focus of our energies, that the point of our very life itself, is to see how we make it in the race of life that God has given us. He saw sports as an accessible parable to most people to help them understand what is most important in life.

Some people get it. Tom Landry certainly did. Most of us know that even during football season when he was in town he never missed worship service on Sunday mornings even on game days—he just went to the 8:30 service at HP UMC.

Still, as our culture becomes more secularized, we forget what really is important. As more and more people move away from honoring a Sabbath day—keeping a day holy for the Lord, and for our own spiritual renewal—we are becoming depleted as people—and begin to create idols of earthly things like big games or big teams or even big celebrity athletes.

We Christians are called to remind people in our increasingly secularized world what really makes Sunday super. Remember that when you're watching the

game—and the commercials—tonight. Are we keeping the Sabbath holy on this American holiday?

Still and all, let me also say that if we, like Paul, can enjoy a sporting event for the opportunity it offers those athletically skilled to use their talents—if we can see that it is still a game—and not life itself—then we also might be able to learn something deeper about life.

There are modern-day parables being taught on the tennis court or golf course or ice rink every day. And this afternoon, we might even be able to catch a glimpse of God at work even in a commercial or on the football field in Arlington, TX that reveals how we can be faithful and bring about a better world.

Kind of like what happened at a Rosebowl game on New Years Day 82 years ago, when Georgia Tech played the University of California. In that game, a man named Roy Riegels recovered a fumble for Cal. Somehow, he became confused and started running the wrong direction. One of his teammates, Benny Lom, overtook and tackled him 65 yards away, just before he scored for the opposing team. When Cal attempted to punt, Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety, which was the ultimate margin of victory.

That strange play came in the first half, and everyone who was watching the game was asking the same question—“What will Coach Nibbs Price do with Roy Riegels in the second half?” The men filed off the field and went into the locker room. They sat down on the benches and on the floor—all but Riegels. He put his blanket around his shoulders, sat down in a corner, put his face in his hands, and cried like a baby.

If you have played football, you know that a coach usually has a great deal to say to his team during halftime. That day, Coach Price was quiet. No doubt he was trying to decide what to do with Riegels. Then the timekeeper came in and announced that there were three minutes before playing time. Coach Price looked at the team and said simply, “Men, the same team that played the first half will start the second.”

The players got up and started out, all but Riegels. He did not budge. The coach looked back and called to him. Still he didn't move. Coach Price went over to him and said, "Roy, didn't you hear me? The same team that played the first half will start the second."

Then Roy Riegels looked up and his cheeks were wet with tears. "Ccoach," he said, "I can't do it to save my life. I've ruined you. I've ruined the University of California. I've ruined myself. I couldn't face the crowd in that stadium to save my life."

Then Coach Price reached out and put his hand on Riegel's shoulder and said to him: "Son, get up and go on back; the game is only half over." And Roy Riegel's went back. Those Georgia Tech men will tell you they had never seen a man play football as Roy Riegels played that second half.

Coach Price—a great teacher of men, not just athletes—taught Roy Riegels and the rest of the world a gospel message—that we all take the ball and run in the wrong direction. We stumble and fall and are so ashamed of ourselves that we never want to try again.

And then God come to us and bends over us in the person of his Son Jesus Christ and says, "Get up and go on back; the game is only half over."

What makes Sunday super? It's not the games themselves, but the skills, abilities and life-lessons we get from participating in those games.

May God grant us that awareness as we gather with millions of our brother and sister Americans this evening not to worship at the altar of the NFL—but to share together in a celebration of community, and an gratitude that God has give us one another for fun and games, and life's serious business.

Thanks be to God.