

SERMON- Proper 9 (A)

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~~Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67~~

Psalms 45: 11-18

Romans 7:15-25a

Good Shepherd (Virtual)

July 5, 2020

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I speak to you in the NAME of the FATHER and of the SON, and of the HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

OPENING:

The father of Vince Lombardi, the famous football coach of the Green Bay Packers, had two words tattooed on his knuckles.

Each was a four letter word and, together, they symbolized the philosophy of both father and son.

They were:

“WORK” and “PLAY.”¹

(This is Week 16, or whenever we are in this thing, so you start to get a little punchy with your sermons.)

Those two words would shape so much of Lombardi’s life.

We are here in the July 4th holiday, and what could be more American than one of the most famous football coaches of all time?

And, since we are four months into a difficult but necessary sports hiatus, I then have two good reasons to mention Vince Lombardi.

GOSPEL

The reason I thought about him, though, goes back to those words: “WORK” and “PLAY” tattooed on his father’s knuckles.

In our Gospel, those seeming antonyms appear in Jesus’s description of “this generation’s” response to his and John the Baptist’s ministries.²

It’s kind of hard to follow but, in the reading, Jesus is trying to say that:

“they” did not like John the Baptist: fire and brimstone, calls to repent, that was too much WORK

And “they” did not like Jesus of Nazareth: grace and love, dining with sinners and tax-collectors, the proclamation of God’s kingdom as a heavenly banquet: too much PLAY.

¹ Maraniss, David. 1999. ‘When Pride Still Mattered’: a Life of Vince Lombardi. New York: Simon & Schuster. 15-16

² Matthew 11.16

SHIFT:

How do we reconcile those two concepts, WORK and PLAY?

How do we avoid the mistake of that “generation” which, surely, we in this generation, are making again?

That is, in 2020, we also feel threatened by anyone who tells us we are working too hard, and, it’s safe to say, simultaneously we feel threatened by anyone who tells us to work harder.

So how did Jesus try to answer that question in his life and ministry?

But, first, let’s start by asking how did Lombardi? What *was* the meaning behind those tattoos, if there were any, for him and his context?

LOMBARDI/ JESUITS:

Vince Lombardi grew up during the Great Depression, in an Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn, where hard work and the Roman Catholic faith were linked inextricably.

At the tender age of 16, he headed to Seminary... (!) for a six-year program that would make him a Catholic priest. At the seminary, however, he showed little aptitude for academics (and was not very athletic either.)

Both WORK and PLAY, it seemed, were eluding him.

He then enrolled at Fordham University and what Lombardi learned there would stick with him for a lifetime.

Fordham was/is a Jesuit institution, founded on the basis of the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius, having given up his life as a soldier and devoting his life to God, developed a set of spiritual practices that sought to help one determine the will of God in our lives.

These practices were demanding and rigorous and they centered around this idea of “freedom in discipline.” The key idea was that our free will, this great gift of God’s to humanity, is only truly free when it is then offered up to the Glory of God.

So, in the words of Lombardi’s biographer: “The Jesuits... believed in man’s liberty to choose between action and inaction, good and evil, but like... military and football coaches, they also maintained a hierarchal order in which the inferior submits willingly to the superior....

The seeming contradiction between free will and blind obedience was resolved by the Jesuits through the vision of a mystical goal: only those with free will could surrender it freely to achieve a higher ideal.”³

Freedom in discipline

That’s what Lombardi learned from the Jesuits and it’s how he squared that balance between WORK and PLAY, between the rough stereotypes of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Freedom in discipline

The Green Bay Packers, under Lombardi, had only one play: the famous Packer Sweep. Just one play, run to ruthless efficiency and precision and discipline, but within that play there were hundreds of variations and liberties that the defense could never account for.

It’s been said that no great person had *fewer* great ideas than Ignatius of Loyola, but very few did more with just one idea. Likewise, Lombardi was known as the most useless man on the sidelines on gameday, because he had already done the work, one play to be run over and over.⁴

THEOLOGY

Freedom in Discipline

Now that’s good for Lombardi, but what about us?

I, for one, am not signing up to be a Jesuit, not to mention for the Green Bay Packers, any time soon.

Our instinct, instead, in our context, is to say that what you need is a balance, that you need both work and play. I think there is wisdom in that. But I think we somehow usually end up missing out on both, on both a call to holiness, and a sense of true celebration.

If you have been paying attention the last month to our readings from Romans, St. Paul has been banging that very drum week after week after week.

Grace and Law, Law and Gospel, Work and Play.

St. Paul’s great contribution was that we are “freed by God’s grace.”

What people heard, though, was “All PLAY, NO Work.”

People came after him for that, most notably other Christians, saying:

³ Maraniss, 65.

⁴ Maraniss, 66, 224, 331-332.

you are preaching immorality if you let people off the hook, without the Law, without rules, without some sort of divine accounting, without discipline, how do we survive?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul replies masterfully:

“The result of God’s liberating grace is not to make us into free moral agents; rather, ‘you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God’ (Romans 6.22a). The appropriate response to God’s grace, Paul insists, is a response of self-presentation in obedience to the one who rescued us from slavery to sin and death.⁵

So that’s similar to Loyola’s and Lombardi’s idea and Paul loved athletic metaphors so they probably all could have had a great time talking about it.

There is a lot of angst in that crew, though, so I would add something about joy, something about PLAY. Something about how God’s dream for us is not onerous labor, but the type of work that will build up God’s kingdom, the type of demands that are life-giving and satisfying. Those might be difficult tasks and hard work, but the burden seems light because Jesus is sharing it with us.

CONCLUSION:

All throughout his life, Lombardi used those Jesuit ideals for his philosophy of coaching the Packers. He was always somewhat embarrassed that he employed them in what was a child’s game, PLAY. Ironically, everyone associated him with the military or with the priesthood, with serious WORK.⁶

Ultimately, the best coaches like to refer themselves as ‘merely’ teachers. Jesus, especially Matthew’s Jesus, is the gifted teacher, he is able to say “learn from me, take my yoke..... it will be light” and they believe him.

Freedom in discipline.

Take on this agricultural device, this awkward wooden contraption intended for farm animals, (almost like a tackling dummy?), and you will be free.

You can picture Jesus demonstrating with his body, like a great coach or teacher, saying that this will feel like true joy, not because it’s easy but because one has found true freedom in the discipline.

AMEN

⁵ Hays, Richard B. 1996. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: a Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco. 38-39. (Emphasis Added).

⁶ Maraniss, 84.