

Sermon

The Rev. Noah Van Niel

St. John the Evangelist

August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Proper 13 (B): Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; Psalm 78:23-29; Ephesians 4:1-16; John 6:24-35

One of the things I loved the most when I played football in college was the strategy. To the untrained eye, the clashing and smashing of huge, sweaty men play after play into big piles may not look like it requires much strategy, but I assure you, it does. You've all seen those chalk board diagrams, right? The ones with the X's and O's and lines coming off in all directions like some ancient hieroglyphics? Well, believe it or not, those convoluted designs actually hold the key to all eleven people on the field, knowing what to do and who to do it to. They are proof that football is *the* most team oriented sport out there, because every X and O at each position has a very specific job to do on each and every play and if even one of the eleven of them fail to do that job, the play is a bust, and the team fails.

I played Fullback. That was my position. It meant sometimes I got to run the ball, sometimes I got to catch the ball, but most of the time I was blocking—trying to move a defender out of the way—so other players could do their jobs, like run the ball, or throw the ball. I remember one time in my freshman year when all these diagrams were still a jumble in my head standing in the huddle, hearing the play call and thinking—“oh shoot, what the heck do I do on that play??” I took a guess—block right. Block left would have been a better choice. And the defender ran right into the ball carrier, stopping him dead in his tracks. Whoops. My bad. Didn't make that mistake again.

The fun, though, comes when everyone does their job and all eleven parts click into place and the play breaks into the open field, resulting in a touchdown. If you've ever wondered why every single player runs into the end zone after a touchdown to congratulate whoever it is who scored, it's because every single person on that field played a part in making that happen. And when that happens, it's actually quite beautiful and a whole lot of fun. (Too bad it also could cost you your brain later in life, as we now have learned.)

If football had been around when the letter to the Ephesians was being written, I think the author might have used that as one of the metaphors he keeps returning to about the way in which the body of Christ functions. The past few weeks we've gotten some really good, quality stuff from Ephesians, and this week is no different. This week the goal is to get us to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called.” But in order to do that, we need to know what it is we have been called to do. And so he continues, “each of us were given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift...The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.” In other words, everyone was given a position to play. A position that suits their particular talents and abilities. Good at throwing? You can play quarterback. Good at catching, you can play wide receiver. Good at nothing? You can play fullback. And the goal, the purpose of this team, is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ [The Church]” and when we do that, it is as though the whole team is “joined and knit together,” so that, when it's working properly, it “promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.”

We've all been around teams that don't function like this; teams that are not joined and knit together. Teams where everyone is complaining, pointing fingers, kind of like the early days of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. And that doesn't work for anyone. But I hope we've all had the experience of being a part of a team (doesn't have to be a sports team) where things ran smoothly: where everyone had a job to do, everyone did it, and where each person was essential to the flourishing of the group. It's an important, instructive model to have in mind because that second kind of team is what the Church, the body of Christ, should be like. Though to tell the truth, we are often more like the first kind of team, and orchestrate our own failures through division and discord.

Given this description of the teamwork necessary to build up the body of Christ, let me ask you, "What position do you play at church?" Are you a singer? Are you a teacher? Are you an organizer? Are you a visitor? Are you a volunteer? Are you a baker? Are you a reader? Are you a preacher? What is your position at church? What job is it that you, and you alone can contribute to build up the body of Christ in this little corner of God's Kingdom?

While you're pondering that, let me help dispel the thought that you actually, don't have anything to contribute to the Church. That you can be a person in the pews and that's about all. Coming to church is good. Contributing at church is better because you have been given gifts that are unique and valuable and needed here. Do you know what those gifts are? Do you know how to offer them? We need you and all that you have to offer. We are less than what we could be if you keep your gifts to yourself.

Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking we come to church to get something. And I hope that when you come, you do receive something; inspiration, hope, strength, faith, comfort, friendship, peace. But getting something is only half a reason to come to church. The other part of the reason to come to church, to be a part of a church, is to give something. One of the interesting things about the metaphor of the *Church* being called the "body" of Christ is that that means none of us, alone, can attain to the "full stature" of Christ. But together, if we pool our gifts, then we begin to attain to that height. Alone we are human, together we can, maybe, possibly, hopefully, a little bit, be Jesus Christ.

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts; there is no I in team, these are ways in which we have come to express this truth that applies in The Church as much as on the gridiron—that if we are ever going to accomplish the work of Jesus Christ in this world we won't do that work as individuals, we will do it together, as a team, as the body of Christ, joined together in love and sending that love out into the world. And each and every one of us has a job to do to make that happen, a position to play. Bring your gifts to bear on the life of this community; offer them to the work of Christ in this place, come to *give* of yourself, not just *get* for yourself. Because when that happens, when play after play all of us are doing our jobs to the utmost of our abilities, for the good of the team, then we shall be victorious.