

**Choosing Sides**  
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Joshua 5:13-15  
Luke 6:20-28

Elon Community Church  
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Okay, I'll lay my cards on the table right off the bat. I don't know much about football. So, I worried about what I was going to say on Football Sunday here at Elon Community Church, a Sunday which has been a longstanding and ranks right up there next to Christmas and Easter as one of the most popular Sundays of the year! I was thinking to myself this week, "Why couldn't Elon Church have a "Fishing Sunday"? Now there's a sport I know something about! I love to surf fish. Jesus' disciples were fishermen. Jesus even advised them on where to throw their nets for the best catch. I could really take off and PREACH about fishing!" But no, Elon Church doesn't have a Fishing Sunday as yet, so I decided to do a little reading and research to learn more about football and how it also might be a metaphor for what it means to live a Christian life.

I discovered that American style football didn't come into its own until about the time of the Civil War. It began as a variation on rugby and its cousin, soccer, among the Ivy League schools in the Northeast. In fact, the rest of the world still calls soccer, "football". If American style football HAD existed in biblical times, Paul would probably have been a fan. Earlier in the service we read a litany which used a lot of sports analogies and illustrations written by Paul. The primary sports of his day were running, boxing, and wrestling, and he was fond of using the metaphor of running a race to talk about the Christian life.

In Paul's era, competitions were mostly between individual athletes. I don't know if they had team sports back in those days. But in modern times, teams are the norm. And we certainly love our teams! Team allegiances are strong, and fans are fiercely loyal.

A minister in Texas was wrapping up a sermon on the last Sunday of August, right before the first game of the pro-football season. Kick-off time was 12:15 that afternoon. The Dallas Cowboys had won the previous Super Bowl, and there was much buzz in this Texas church about their chances in the coming season. As usual, the pastor asked the congregation, "Does anyone have any joys and concerns to share at this time?"

A voice in the congregation said, " Yeah...Dallas Cowboys!"

Another voice said, "Hope the Boys go all the way again."

Another voice chimes in, "Amen! And a prayer for Troy Aikman's throwing arm."

The pastor frowned. "Enough already! Do you really think God takes sides and cares about the Cowboys winning? Let's have prayer for a different matter now!"

There was a pause as the congregation thought this over. Then a voice said, "Okay. How about a prayer for the pastor if this service does not end by kick-off time?"

Choosing sides. When a football team takes the field, there are two teams. No player walks onto the field undecided. It is quite clear who is the home team and who are the challengers. But things aren't always so clear-cut.

There's a story in the Old Testament about a time when the Israelites were about to begin a battle for the city of Jericho. They are awaiting God's command to attack. Joshua , the leader of the Israelite army, walks to a place overlooking the city where he can think about the coming battle. Suddenly, there is a mighty warrior standing in front of him with a drawn sword. He is huge and mysterious, and Joshua knows that this is no ordinary man. He knows he is not one of the Israelites. Being a true military man, however, he courageously stands up to the stranger and asks, "Are you for us, or are you for our adversaries?" And the stranger answers, "Neither one." This must have taken Joshua by surprise. He expected this mighty warrior to choose sides. He expected him to say that he was either going to fight on behalf of the Israelites or he was going to fight for the army of Jericho.

But the mysterious stranger answers that he is not on either side. He is aligned only with God's army. This battle was not Joshua's battle and the enemy was not the people of Jericho. This was really about a bigger battle, a spiritual struggle. And it was not for Joshua to ask God whose side he was on. Rather, it was up to Joshua to decide if he was on God's side. So, when he hears the identity of this mysterious stranger, he does the right thing. He asks what God wants of him, and the mysterious stranger says that Joshua should remove his shoes because the place where he is standing is holy ground.

God reminds Joshua that the earth is a sacred place. God can be found anywhere and everywhere...on a high place overlooking a city, in a burning

bush, on top of a mountain, or on a college campus. All ground is holy ground. When we choose God's side, we choose to fight for love and life and blessing. In Deuteronomy, God says, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19)."

Choosing God's side means choosing life. It means doing all we can to protect those who are weak or poor or vulnerable, so that their lives can be as full and joyful as those who are stronger. I understand that the theme for the Elon football team this year is "Mission". Well, the people on God's team have a mission. They are to stand up against oppression, oppose violence, and find a way to be a force for love and justice and peace in a world that is often cruel and unfair.

One person who did this was Dr. Martin Luther King. He lived during an era when it was dangerous to speak out against segregation and racism. It was a time when peaceful protests were met with police brutality, and civil rights activists were threatened, assaulted, and even killed. Dr. King was cursed, spat on, and jailed. But he had learned what Joshua had learned. He knew that the people who were opposing and hurting him were not his enemies. They were his brothers. He knew that there is a difference between hating what someone does while still loving the person who does the bad action. He knew that Jesus has said, "Blessed are the peacemakers", and that it takes strength to work for peace and justice. King spoke out courageously against the injustice of segregation and racism, yet he also pleaded for love and forgiveness among people of every color. He knew that we all really play on the same team.

Since it is Football Sunday, let me give you another example of someone who understood what it meant to choose God's side. My own college football team, the Wake Forest Demon Deacons, never did very well during the years I was there. However, I am proud of their recent achievement: playing in the Orange Bowl in 2007 against Louisville and becoming the smallest school ever to compete in the Bowl Championship Series. Another aspect of Wake Forest football history which gives me pride is that Brian Piccolo played for Wake before going pro with the Chicago Bears.

You may know about Brian Piccolo. He led the nation in rushing and scoring during his senior season at Wake in 1964 and was named the ACC Player of Year. A year before, when Piccolo was a junior, Darryl Hill of the University of Maryland became the first and only African-American football

player in the Atlantic Coast Conference. According to Lee Corso, who was an assistant coach at Maryland at that time, Wake Forest had the "worst atmosphere" of any place the Maryland football team played. The Wake Forest crowd jeered and booed Darryl Hill when he came out on the field with the Maryland team. Piccolo went over to the Maryland bench, walked Hill over to the area in front of the student section, and put his arm around him, silencing the crowd. Brian Piccolo was choosing sides that day. And he was choosing a side that was bigger than his own Wake Forest team. Like that mysterious warrior who answered Joshua, he wanted to play on God's team. He was on the side of justice, equality, and compassion.

Piccolo later signed on as a free agent with the Chicago Bears. During that time, he roomed with Gale Sayers, an African-American tailback, and the two broke ground by rooming together and developing a deep friendship. When Sayers was trying to come back after a devastating knee injury, Piccolo was there, encouraging him and urging him on. And when Piccolo lay dying from cancer at the age of 26, Gale Sayers was by his side. Their story was told in the movie, "Brian's Song", which came out after Piccolo died in 1970. The movie was based on Gale Sayers' autobiography, "I Am Third."

Brian Piccolo and Gale Sayers knew what it meant to choose God's side and not just assume the separate roles that a segregated society dictated for them. They knew that the Kingdom of God is the ideal, the real prize that we should strive for.

When Jesus stood up to preach what we now call "The Sermon on the Mount", he gave us some important clues as to what the Kingdom of God might be like. It's all about the people that God says are part of the real Team:

***Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

***Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.***

***Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.***

***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.***

***Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.***

***Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.***

***Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.***

***Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

The poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek- they seem like a weak bunch. Would you pick them for your team? The merciful, the pure in heart- they don't sound like heavy-hitters. If they played for the team, the opposition would run right over them. And those who hunger for righteousness, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for their unpopular beliefs- they sound like fanatics or bleeding heart tree huggers! They wouldn't have what it takes to play an aggressive game.

But, the comfort in Jesus' words is that the unlikeliest team makes selection to the kingdom of God... the little ones, the struggling ones, the wounded ones, those who feel the injustices of the world so keenly that it upsets them deeply. (*John Davies, Liverpool, UK, [www.johndavies.org/sermons/gs\\_05\\_01\\_30.html](http://www.johndavies.org/sermons/gs_05_01_30.html)*)

These words of Jesus are considered the central core of his teachings. For Christians, they should be more important than the Ten Commandments. They are the teachings which show us what it means to live into our life's mission. When we are poor in spirit, we make room for God. When we mourn, we are remembering that Jesus has told us to love others as much as we love ourselves. If we love like this, then we will mourn when we see others in pain. We will have a deep concern about suffering in the world. And we will do something about it.

If we are meek, then we exercise self-control. We don't let our pride or anger get the better of us, and we refuse to be aggressive, even when provoked. If we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we seek to live our lives in right relationship. We strive to have a right relationship with God and with other people.

If we are merciful, then we practice compassion and forgiveness. If we are pure in heart, then we have a focused spiritual life. We have a pure, focused vision that allows us to see and feel God's presence in the world around us.

When we are peacemakers, then we do God's work. Jesus says that this is the mission of those on God's team. It is hard work, because it means loving people who treat us badly, but it is what we do when we try to create a better world where all people are respected and differences are celebrated.

And finally, we remember that Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake”. When we commit ourselves to peacemaking, being merciful, and developing a right relationship with God, then we have to be prepared for some suffering. Sticking up for what is right takes courage, but those who prevail are the ones that Jesus calls the citizens of God’s Kingdom. In other words, they are the MVP’s on God’s team.

Life comes at you hard. The legendary coach Vince Lombardi once said, “Football is not a contact sport. Dancing is a contact sport. Football is a collision sport.” When life hits you hard, remember Jesus’ words. And remember that playing on God’s team is the mission for all of us. It’s not always easy, but we’ve been promised a good coach who’ll guide our feet every step of the way!