

“God of the Altar, God of the Arena”

Joshua 24: 14-18
Matthew 6: 24
“Idolatry” by Frederick Buechner
In *Beyond Words*

Rev. Brian Heron
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
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This is a big day in America. Not for everyone, but for a lot of people who consider Super Bowl Sunday a sort of national holiday. This week I heard an interesting news report that many of Catholic Churches are actually canceling or postponing services in New Orleans for the Super Bowl. They said that two weeks ago when the Saints played the Vikings there were only a handful of people in the pews and they anticipated it would be worse today. It makes for an interesting interpretation of our Scripture texts today.

Both our texts in Joshua and in the gospel of Matthew make a very clear and pointed demand that a person can only serve one God at a time. In Joshua the people of Israel have just conquered numerous lands. They now have the ability to set up their own nation. It's at this point that Joshua says to them, *“It's time to make a decision now. You can either worship the God who led you out of Egypt, the God of Abraham and Moses or you can worship the gods of the Amorites where we currently live.”* In Matthew Jesus says, **“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.”**

This may seem a little rigid. Both Joshua and Jesus tell their followers that they have to make a choice. It's either full allegiance to one or full allegiance to the other. You either remain loyal to the church or remain loyal to your team, it could be stretched to mean. It seems strange in that we don't ask our children to promise absolute loyalty to only one parent. And, even though some teachers dole out homework as if they were the only teacher, teachers expect students to spread out their loyalty to their various teachers.

What makes God different is that God doesn't just put claims on portions of our lives. God isn't like a teacher who only has dibs on one's educational life. God isn't like a cop who only commands authority in matters of law and conduct. God's claim is on the whole of our lives: our work lives, our family life, our values and ethics, our recreation, our worship, and even what we eat and drink.

This is why Joshua and Jesus are able to say, **“You can't serve two Gods at one time. It's time to make a choice between one or the other.”** Being that this is Super Bowl Sunday it would be very much like the athlete who goes to a new team and who continues to deride the new coach saying, *“Coach Smith never coached me this way. Coach Smith gave me more playing time. Coach Smith never made me practice that way.”* Finally, the coach has to say, *“Look buddy, you can't serve two coaches at one time for you will find yourself devoted to the one and despise the other. It's time for you to choose.”*

I write this today as much of the community will be gathering around their high definition TVs with chips, beer and hot dogs to watch the Super Bowl. I am going to admit that I enjoy the fun, the gentle ribbing, the outrageous commercials, and the celebration that comes with supporting our sports teams. I listen to the Blazers play as often as I can and I can get pretty excited about cheering for them.

But, I think there is a big difference between supporting our teams and worshiping a false god. This may seem like a pretty outrageous charge to level at our sports teams, but I think I

have pretty good evidence that we may have crossed a line into idolatry when it comes to our sports. Frederick Buechner says, "*Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth.*"

Do you remember a time when the value of sports was rooted in its ability to teach teamwork? Remember when sports was about building character? Remember when competition only served to bring out the best in people, teaching hard work, perseverance, and a never-quit attitude?

This sermon is not about encouraging people to go to the church rather than watch a Super Bowl. This sermon is not about saying church is good and sports are bad. No, actually, it's even deeper than that. This sermon is about the gods we choose to serve. And quite honestly, we are either dangerously close or we have already crossed the line into worshipping a false god. What is this false god? It is called winning. It used to be that winning was a potential result of playing hard, working together, and having confidence. Now, winning is only goal of playing.

Just look at the evidence of this shift. Have you ever watched a game and heard the announcer say, "*Now, that was a good foul*"? How do you get a good foul? Well, a good foul is when you foul someone who is less likely to make foul shots than he is to make a regular shot. The problem is the whole purpose of calling fouls is to make sure the game is played fairly, that no one gets hurt, and that the game remains a basketball game and doesn't turn into a boxing match. If you are worshipping the God of fairness, teamwork, and character building there is no such thing as a "good foul." A good foul is an oxymoron.

Joshua and Jesus say that you cannot serve two masters because you'll end up devoted to the one and despising the other. This isn't about worshipping the God of Christianity and the God of Hinduism or the God of Native American spirituality. Those gods are similar enough that to worship one is to worship the other. This is about deciding whether we are going to worship the God of compassion or the God of winning and competition. This is about deciding whether we are going to worship the God of the altar or the God of the arena. And this is where I think we have come to place of worshipping false idols.

When players start taking steroids they are worshipping the God of the arena. When coaches start stealing the playbooks of other teams they are worshipping the God of the arena. When players taunt, heckle and name call the opponents as a way of getting into their head they are worshipping the God of the arena. It's not about the game. It becomes only about winning.

But, worshipping the God of the altar can happen on the sports field. It happens all the time, but the clearest most beautiful example of it took place here in Oregon. You may remember the softball game between Western Oregon University and Central Washington in a playoff game. With two runners on base, Sara Tucholsky, a senior who had never hit a home run, came to the plate and with one strike on her she did what she had never done before. She hit a home run. Unfortunately, as she crossed first base she missed the plate and ended up tearing her knee ligament. Lying on the ground not able to move the umpire ruled that if any of her own players touched her she would be out. A pinch runner could also be substituted for her, but she would only be credited with a single.

With that, Mallory Holtman, from the opposing team and the all time home run leader of the Northwest Conference took action. She asked the umpire if she and her teammates could carry Sara around the bases. Stunned, the umpire said there was nothing in the rulebook that prohibited that. So, with two Central Washington players carrying her, Sara rounded the bases

and was credited with the three-run home run. And, those three runs were the difference in their 4-2 win.

Asked why she did, Mallory Holtman said, *“In the end, it is not about winning and losing so much. It was about this girl. She hit it over the fence and was in pain, and she deserved a home run.”*

Joshua says, **“Choose you this day whom you will serve. But, as for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”**