

The 20 mph Fastball – John 15: 9-17  
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond  
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska  
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Since I have been in Omaha I have learned more about being a sports fan than I thought possible. When I arrived here January 1<sup>st</sup>, the University of Nebraska football team was playing in a bowl game. It was coincidence that we drove into town during the playing of the game. While driving on the freeway I said to Nancy, “I wonder how they are doing in the game?” At that very moment I saw a giant-sized billboard that displayed an up to the minute score of the game. Never have I seen anything like that anywhere. For the next few days the big news in the Omaha World Herald was the game, which seemed normal to me, after all, people like to read the good news about their team. What followed since then is what has surprised me. Not a single day passes without, on the front page of the sports section, another University of Nebraska football story. Once again I can candidly say, I have never seen anything like that anywhere. This place is teaching me a whole new meaning to the term “sports fan.”

Sports have always been a big part of my life. As a boy growing-up in eastern Pennsylvania I became a fan of the Philadelphia Phillies and Eagles. Bethlehem is about equal distance from Philadelphia and New York City. Both Philadelphia and New York television stations were received in Bethlehem, and I had choices of becoming a Phillies or Yankee fan. Perhaps because of the way my own life was taking shape, I liked the underdogs, and that can be translated into a Phillies fan. In my neighborhood it was tough to root for Robin Roberts and not for Mickey Mantle. To this day I take great joy when the Phillies win and the Yankees lose.

I learned to love baseball so much that I signed-up for little league baseball as soon as I was old enough. In those years there were so many kids that they had three different ability levels of leagues: the best, the average, and the least talented. When I was about 10 years old I had arms and legs that resembled tooth picks more than legs and arms. If I had been able to hit the ball

out of the infield, then that was a great at-bat for me. Needless to say, I was placed in the “least” league. I was in the leftover league, that is, the kids that had no hope of ever being a respectable ball player. For the other two leagues, the boys were chosen, for the leftover league, we were placed. Even then I knew that I had not been chosen for anything.

My position was always right field because the ball never was hit there. One day I told the coach I would like to be a catcher, but I knew I was too skinny for such a demanding position, and returned to right field where I could do no harm. One day before the game the coach said to me, “Today you are going to be our catcher.” I could not believe that the coach chose me, with my toothpick arms and legs, to play the most difficult position on the team. He helped me with the catcher’s gear, the chest pad, shin guards, facemask, and that huge round mitt that I could almost hide my entire body behind. Most the time the pitches fell harmlessly to the ground and I would pick up the rolling ball and throw it back, most of the time hitting the ground and it became a roller. Every once-in-a-while, the pitcher would throw a fastball and I would need to catch it. It was a fast moving pitch that had to be traveling no less than 20 mph. Whenever that would happen it would inevitably knock me down, and that was embarrassing. I would, however, always resume my position behind the plate and wait for the next roller or fastball. If it was a fastball, it would knock me down and I would need to once again get up, brush off the dust, and resume my esteemed position behind the plate, frequently wondering why the coach chose me for such a job. After a couple years, my baseball career was over.

Do you know where the word “coach,” as in baseball coach, comes from? It is a word that describes a vehicle that was drawn by horses and transports people from one place to another. A coach is a person who is supposed to transport a person from one place to another. To transport a person from being a minor leaguer to a major leaguer, from being assigned as a leftover to be a chosen and valued member of the team.

Today’s gospel passage is about being chosen. Jesus said to the disciples: *“You did not choose me; I chose you. I appointed you to go on and*

*bear fruit, fruit that shall last...*” What seems incredible about those words is that Jesus would choose them! Those disciples were the equivalent of a group of spindly kids with toothpick arms and legs, who could not catch a fastball of more than 20 mph, and were being placed in the World Series against the likes of Mickey Mantle, Roger Marris and Whitey Ford. That is not exactly an all-star team that Jesus organized.

Those who have been chosen sometimes find it difficult to believe that they are chosen for anything. This congregation has now begun the process of searching for the next installed senior pastor. You will be choosing such a person to lead you, and there will be many opinions of what that person should be and what qualities they should have. After the congregational response to the Interim Action Committee’s work was completed and qualities for the next Senior pastor were identified, I resolved that should you find that person then I will make a weekly commute from Idaho simply to be near him or her, for truly that person will be the most skilled and talented person that has ever graced the world. Congregations are always searching for such a person.

Don’t lose heart, because pastors are also searching for congregations that have the same great characteristics. I once had the audacity to ask a search committee if they had the same high marks that they required for their next pastor?

There are people that spend their entire life looking for the perfect church, the church that has no flaws and functions beautifully, smoothly, never fails, and take fastball pitches at any speed and never gets knocked over. Congregations where everyone loves everyone and there are no conflicts or disagreements. Congregations that have fine, upstanding reputations in the community, and where anybody who is anybody wants to attend and be connected, congregations with magnificent buildings that are the pride of the community. Such churches, people or pastors do not exist. For the most part, we are all a bunch of spindly kids with, toothpick sized arms, legs, and spirits, and wonder how it could possible be that we could be chosen for anything other than playing in deep right field where the ball never gets hit and we could do no damage.

There is no reason we should ever expect to be asked to be in any important position, because we know that we are likely to get knocked over by any 20 mph fastball. It is easier to play deep right field and then go home and watch the New York Yankees on television

Jesus said; *“You did not choose me, I chose you”* and we ask, “Why, how could that be, because I have toothpick legs and arms and just about zero skills. Take a look at us, Jesus, we are few and our resources are limited. If we promised to give away everything in the building at next weeks worship service, we would not get even one visitor. Why would you choose us, why us, Jesus? We have tooth pick arms and legs, and get knocked over by a 20 mph fastball.” Jesus says: “Because you are all that I have. I don’t have Hall of Fame catchers and pitchers to turn to. I don’t have the all-stars that set great records. All I have is you, and if I don’t have you, then I have no one.” What must be attended to will never be completed unless we say; “OK, I will set myself behind the plate and chance getting knocked down by every pitch, getting hurt. I will do that because you want me to and you seem to have some reason to believe I can catch the pitches, but I am really afraid that I am not going to be able to get back up after one of those pitches.” Then Jesus reminds us that those spindly, unskilled kids – us - have one thing that will make the difference. We will have him.

Fear is the greatest inhibitor of the work of Christians in the Church. During the 1960’s and 70’s there were a few Christian congregations that bravely and loudly challenged the activities of our government. Those congregations often became the target of ridicule for being un-American and unpatriotic. History has proven that to be the case in just about every nation where the Church has had a presence. To be critical of a government or nation was to become the focus of disdain.

William Willimon wrote this reminder recently.

*“The confession ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ represented a subversive claim. To tell the world that Jesus Christ was Lord was to tell the world that you did not believe that Caesar is Lord... Christians were not persecuted so much for obeying Jesus, but were persecuted for disobeying Caesar.”*

The message and ministry of Jesus and his life was, and still is, to change the world into the way God wants it, and it can never happen unless we get our loyalties straight. Who are we listening to? Who do we follow?

There was an interesting television show on this week about why so many people were willing to die for Adolph Hitler. The people they interviewed had a simple answer: because they thought he was the messiah.

Rev. Gregory Love of San Francisco Theological Seminary wrote, of Jesus' disciples and also us, the Church of today:

*“Jesus chose them, equipped them for love and sent them out into a hostile world to transform it.”*

George R. Pasley, pastor of the Ketchikan Presbyterian Church in Ketchikan, Alaska added:

*“Jesus tells us, we were chosen, and appointed, to the task of love. We know what to do, because Jesus loved us. He took risks for us. He went out (on) a limb for us – and it was a long, spindly limb!”*

Yes, as difficult as it may be to believe, our God has confidence in you, and in what we can do together. Just think of it, a bunch of tooth pick sized kids called in from the safe far distance of the outfield to catch fastballs. I suppose God knows something about us that we don't even know about ourselves. We may not think we are up to the task, but God said, *“Put on the chest protector, the shin guard, the face mask, and that oversized glove, because today you are going to play the most challenging position of all. Today, I am choosing you.”*

PLAY BALL Amen.