

ON THE GROWING EDGE

4) Forging Our Future

1 Corinthians 9: 19-23 / Matthew 13: 31-32

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(The message begins with a dramatic entrance into the sanctuary from the narthex. I will dribble a basketball down the center aisle to the base of the chancel. A stool will be in place and as I take my seat, I will begin with the following observation...)

There are some people who look at this and see only a basketball—one that could be found on virtually any playground or in any gym. And they, of course, would be correct. But when I look at this, I see more than a basketball in my hands.

I see a seed—a tiny seed that has the potential to become something far larger than anyone of us might ever imagine. In fact, this seed might just become large enough in its growth and the ministry that it creates that it actually changes the shape and direction of our future as a congregation.

Allow me to explain.

We have been thinking over the past month about the parable of the mustard seed and its central message that the kingdom of heaven often unfolds in surprisingly subtle ways—ways that are often recognized only after the fact. But, by the grace of God at work in human life, the smallest of seeds can become the largest of shrubs—so large, in fact, that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.

It is by the grace of God at work in the life of a generous family that we have been gifted with the resources to construct a new recreation center—The ARC (Athletic Recreation Center) is what we have named it. It is the intent of both the donor and our church that this building be used as a way of providing both a sense of recreation and a sense of connection not only for us as a congregation, but for the community of which we are a part. In fact, very early on, we determined that this building could not be just for our own benefit, but that it must be used as a resourced to be shared with our community.

The reason for this conviction, I think, is fairly obvious. We live in a community that is passionate (to say the least) about its recreation—especially for children and youth. The daily schedules of parents often revolve around providing transportation and other forms of support of their children who are on some type of sports team—from soccer to basketball to baseball to swimming.

Sports—it's what we do and it is, I would suggest, the primary influencer of our current culture.

We, in the church, of course, are not unaware of this reality. Over time we have witnessed, for example, the encroachment of sport on what used to be considered, Sunday morning sacred time—time set apart for religious worship. I remember that, when I was a boy, it

was a big deal to even think of playing baseball on a Sunday afternoon, let alone a Sunday morning.

Well, in case you haven't noticed, our culture no longer has any hesitation in viewing Sunday morning as a logical and essential time in which to schedule soccer tournaments, swim meets and baseball picture taking sessions. There is, I think, little awareness that it has ever been any different!

Given this dramatic change in perspective and priority, those of us who have been staunch advocates of the importance of regular worship and faith formation have often struggled with our response. Initially, it was somewhat trendy to simply criticize this change and to complain about the moral and spiritual laxity of our culture. How dare they infringe upon our sacred domain!!

While it was not difficult to work up a good sense of moral outrage, some of us discovered that it wasn't especially helpful or even healthy. The fact is that our world has changed and the priorities of our culture have shifted. No amount of preaching passion was going to stem the tide of this change. It was what it was...and it is what it is.

It was a number of years ago that it became apparent to me that if the Church as an institution was going to survive our cultural shift, then it needed to be less reactive and more proactive in its approach. Instead of railing against the moral failure of our culture, time would be better spent trying to understand and respond to the hunger and the hope of that culture—much of it spiritual in nature.

You see, I believe that the cultural shift that we are witnessing with Sunday morning sports in no way indicates that people are less spiritual in the questions that they ask and the meaning that they seek.

In fact, I would contend that our spiritual hunger as a people has never been greater than it is in this present moment of time. The difference that we are seeing is, at least in part, related to the fact that the Church has, too often, become so caught up in its institutionalism that it has lost the relevance and the respect that it once held. Sadly, there are a growing number of people who seek to satisfy their spiritual needs elsewhere.

This much, I think, is a given. There can be no debating our current reality that the Church as a whole, is in decline. It's a clear and undeniable fact. The real question is, what in the world are we going to do about it? Are we going to content ourselves with the tired complaints about our changing culture? Or, are we willing to re-examine our approach to faith in a contemporary setting? In other words, are we willing to change, to adapt and revise?

That is really the question that is before us. And the answer is by no means certain. Someone recently suggested to me that while there is often anxiety that is related to what will happen if we change, there is also anxiety that is related to what will happen if we don't change. That anxiety, in my own thinking, is far greater because I believe that the answer is

clear: not to change is to decline and die. So it is that I would like to talk with you this morning about the possibilities for creative change that our new recreation center makes possible.

The Apostle Paul was a very practical man when it came to the application of his faith. While he could expound upon the theoretical with the best of the thinkers of his day, it was his practical wisdom that enabled him to connect with his culture in a powerful way. In our lesson from 1 Corinthians, Paul provides us with a key insight as to his approach to proclaiming the “good news” of Jesus Christ. **“I have become,”** he writes, **“all things to all people that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel.”** (1 Corinthians 9: 22-23) Paul had the ability to speak the language of whatever culture he found himself in—Jewish or Gentile, Roman or Greek—it did not matter. While his message did not change, his approach in presenting that message did and, as a result, he was able to relate to and communicate with any environment in which he found himself. As a result, the early Christian movement flourished under his leadership.

What I am suggesting, you see, is not new. It is, in fact, as old as the Apostle Paul’s witness. If we really want to relate to and communicate with the world around us, there is no better opportunity to do that than through the language of sports and recreation. The ARC Building provides us with an ideal arena in which to do that.

Now, this does not mean that we merely copy our culture and its attitude toward sports and competition. It does not mean that we adopt, in our programming a “winning is the only thing” mentality. In fact, this building offers the wonderful opportunity to go against the grain of a culture obsessed with winning and the celebrity status that sports afford. It offers to us the opportunity of practicing an approach toward sports that is truly “recreational,” that is, an approach that “re-creates” a healthy sense of self and a healthy sense of others, an approach that is not self-centered but team centered.

The late John Wooden was a remarkable basketball coach, but even more importantly, he was an extraordinary human being who lived his life with a conviction about the values of sport that are worth putting into practice. His enduring legacy can be found in more than his success in winning basketball games at UCLA, but in the wisdom that he imparted to his players. Here are three of his fundamental messages:

- **Happiness begins where selfishness ends.**
- **Be more concerned with your character than with your reputation.**
- **Success is peace of mind attained only through self-satisfaction in knowing that you made the effort to do the best of which you are capable.**

As you may know, John Wooden was a man of deep faith who believed in applying the principles and values of his faith to his approach to coaching basketball. And that approach had a life changing impact upon many of his players as well as those who understand that there is much more to basketball than simply winning games and

earning attention for oneself. There are life lessons that it can teach—lessons that can prove to be far more valuable than the richest contract ever signed.

As we think about the kind of program that we will offer, once our new building is built, rest assured that the witness of John Wooden and his values centered approach to coaching, will give shape and definition to the approach that we will take. When it comes to the playing of any sport or any game, character counts and we will have the opportunity to share this message in a variety of ways with a culture and a community that needs to hear it.

One of the key questions that every church ought to be asking itself is this: “Are our best days behind us? Or, are they yet ahead of us? Should we spend our time looking back over our shoulder to the “good ol’ days of what was? Or do we have reason to look forward toward our future with anticipation to what will yet be?

I want to go on record this morning that with the adoption of our strategic plan and the construction of our new ARC, there is no doubt that we have a very exciting future to look forward to. By grace of God, we’ve been blessed with an amazing opportunity to connect with our community as we communicate a message that many are longing to hear. They may be religiously suspicious, but there is no doubt that they are spiritually hungry as they look for meaning in their day to day lives.

I believe that the good news of Jesus Christ has never been more relevant or timely.

Through the seeds that we sow in our strategic plan our new building, we have the opportunity to grow trees—trees that will provide a place of connection, of nurture and nourishment for many—a place that they can call home.

And the Kingdom of Heaven will take root and grow in ways that we cannot even begin to imagine. Thanks be to God! Amen.