

The Church of St. Michael' the Archangel
The Reverend Sally Hubbell
Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
January 15, 2012

Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20); Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John
1:43-51

I'm feeling a little inundated by talk about Tim Tebow.

Last week, when I was looking around for a good story to illustrate Jesus' relationship with his disciples and with us as we read about them in our Gospel passage for this morning, I logged onto the "Call and Response" Blog which is put together by my alma mater, Duke Divinity School. It's a collection of articles related to the Christian faith gathered from news sources all over the world. On this particular day, one third of all of the articles were about Tim Tebow. Later on, a neighbor brought over a Time Magazine article called "Tebow's Testimony: What his faith on the field means for the future of American Evangelicalism." And then another neighbor shared a joke about Tim Tebow. Yesterday the Denver Post called him "the ultimate religious phenomenon in sports."¹ I started to wonder, could God be speaking to me through Tim Tebow? Maybe he's speaking to all of us through Tim Tebow, and *Tim* should be the subject my sermon!"

So, let's start with the Joke:²

Tom Brady, after living a full life, died. When he got to heaven, God was showing him around. They came to a modest little house with a faded Patriots flag in the window.

"This house is yours for eternity Tom," said God. "This is very special; not everyone gets a house up here." Tom felt special, indeed, and walked up to his house.

On his way up the porch, he noticed another house just around the corner. It was a huge 3-story mansion with Orange and Blue sidewalks and drive ways, a 50 foot tall flagpole with an enormous Broncos logo flag waving, a swimming pool in the shape of a horse, a Broncos logo in every window, and a Tim Tebow jersey on the front door.

Tom looked at God and said "God, I'm not trying to be ungrateful, but I have a question. I was an all-pro QB, I won 3 Super Bowls, and I even went to the Hall of Fame."

God said "So what's your point Tom?"

"Well, why does Tim Tebow get a better house than me?"

God chuckled, and said "Tom, that's not Tim's house, it's mine."

Now, you may or may not know, I'm on shaky ground telling football jokes or even talking about sports at all. There are not many subjects (I hope) of which I am quite so ignorant and in danger of making a fool of myself. The only time I can possibly count as a fan is when one of my sons is on the field -- and even then I rely heavily on the person sitting next to me to explain what's going on in the game. Because I know so little about sports, I didn't trust myself to deliver this joke without getting all of details down on paper, and so I asked my neighbor to e-mail me the specifics. He did so with the following warning: "keep in mind Sally - this is funny before the Broncos lose Sat.

¹ Electa Draper, "Play On, Pray On." The Denver Post, January 14, 2012.

² "Tim, Tom, and God," shared by my neighbor Tom Heck.

night or IF (notice the big if) they win. If the Broncos lose, do not use this joke as it may appear God has turned his back on Tim.”

I don't think my neighbor realized that really this joke works best for a sermon in light of their loss. His comment, “If they lose... it may appear God has turned his back on Tim” points precisely to the very real pitfall, the fragility of faith based upon any such concrete outcome or fact of life as a football score.

I wonder how many sermons are going to be referencing Tim Tebow today? I had never taken any notice of Tim Tebow until his name became a verb -- a feat which I think transcends the world of sports! Around that time, I read something about him in the WSJ praising the generosity and humility that seems to come from his very genuine Christian faith, and his understanding that football is “just a game” and that God doesn't really care who wins or loses. I decided I liked this guy. Like a lot of people (who are coming out of the woodwork because of Tim Tebow) I find I often feel uncomfortable with sports religiosity because I think it can do more to divide people than unite them, but worse it implies that God really does care about football or whatever human game we're playing (and the further assumption: he's on my side!). But, I honestly don't think that's where Tim Tebow is coming from. I'll tell you why, by quoting just one of the dozens of articles I've seen just in the past few days. This one is by By Rick Reilly and published on ESPN.com:

“Remember last week, when the world was pulling its hair out in the hour after Tebow had stunned the [Pittsburgh Steelers](#) with an 80-yard OT touchdown pass to [Demaryius Thomas](#) in the playoffs? And Twitter was exploding with 9,420 tweets about Tebow per second? When an ESPN poll was naming him the most popular athlete in America?

Tebow was spending that hour talking to 16-year-old Bailey Knaub about her 73 surgeries so far and what TV shows she likes.

“Here he'd just played the game of his life,” recalls Bailey's mother, Kathy, of Loveland, Colo., “and the first thing he does after his press conference is come find Bailey and ask, ‘Did you get anything to eat?’ He acted like what he'd just done wasn't anything, like it was all about Bailey.”....

Bailey herself said: “It was the best day of my life....It was a bright star among very gloomy and difficult days. Tim Tebow gave me the greatest gift I could ever imagine. He gave me strength for the future. I know now that I can face any obstacle placed in front of me. Tim taught me to never give up because at the end of the day, today might seem bleak but it can't rain forever and tomorrow is a new day, with new promises.”...

You may know already, that every game he plays, at home or away, Tebow invites some ordinary person whose suffering or struggling in some way, someone who needs precisely the kind of lift that Bailey Knaub describes, to games. He pays every penny of their expenses, but the most generous part is that he actually spends time with them. A lot of time, both before and after the game.

As Rick Riley puts it, *“This whole thing makes no football sense, of course. Most NFL players hardly talk to teammates before a game, much less visit with the sick and dying.*

Isn't that a huge distraction? [Riley asks.]

*"Just the opposite," Tebow says. "It's by far the best thing I do to get myself ready. Here you are, about to play a game that the world says is the most important thing in the world. Win and they praise you. Lose and they crush you. And here I have a chance to talk to the coolest, most courageous people. It puts it all into perspective. The game doesn't really matter. I mean, I'll give 100 percent of my heart to win it, but in the end, the thing I most want to do is not win championships or make a lot of money, it's to invest in people's lives, to make a difference."*³

I love this guy.

Before I go any further, let me tell you why I first thought about all of this sports stuff in relation to our Gospel passage. What in the end, does it all have to say about Jesus' relationship with his disciples and with us?

On this second Sunday After *the* Epiphany of who the baby Jesus is, we get more epiphany. Now the ministry of the man Jesus is underway, and this morning we get the calling of his first disciples and one rather interesting conversion. Initially Nathanael is skeptical, and asks his friend Philip "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" but he accepts Philip's invitation to "come and see" and he quickly changes his mind. Jesus indicates that he knows Nathanael, has somehow seen him and knows who he is, and that's enough for Nathanael. He declares, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these."

It seems enough to Nathanael that Jesus saw him before they met face to face. He feels known to him, and who really knows us but God? Nathanael recognizes that he is known by Jesus, and that's what it takes for him to become a follower of Jesus--and a believer that he is the Son of God.

The question for us today, is what does it take for us to become believers? What does it take for you and for me to follow Jesus? If you listen to all of the hype in the media right now, then you might think a Broncos win last night would have done the trick. But I don't think so. That would be a fragile and opportunistic faith. This is where the football illustration must end, because the reason for faith can't be based on a score. When it comes to what really matters in life, what we're willing to stake our lives on, there's only one victory that counts and it isn't on a football field.

In his book Surprised by Meaning, the British Theologian Alister McGrath writes that "one of the most profound realities of human existence" is that "things that are really worth believing in lie beyond proof. Our most important beliefs are the ones that simply cannot be proved."⁴ Let me explain what he means: there are many facts which can be proved beyond any shadow of doubt. $2+2=4$, for instance. The chemical formula for water is H₂O. The Broncos lost their game last night with the Patriots. These are provable facts, and each is important in it's own way -- but they aren't the kinds of truths to which we look for the meaning of life. We're not going to raise our children based on principals we derive from them, or find our calling in life because of them. Verifiable facts such as these generally don't influence our understanding of what it means to live in the world. The really big life questions depend on truths we arrive at on a far deeper level, and they aren't scientifically provable. They are things like this: I believe all

³ Rick Reilly, ESPN.com, January 13, 2012.

⁴ Alister E. McGrath, Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith, and How we Make Sense of Things. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

human beings are created in the image of God, and because of this belief I am called to make communion with other people my primary goal in life. This is what gives me my sense of purpose in the world, and it's an unprovable belief. Even if a person is an atheist and doesn't believe in any traditional religious points of faith, they still must derive their sense of purpose and meaning from some kind of unprovable truth (for them). Here's an example: a person might say there is no afterlife, there's nothing beyond death, and therefore I should live everyday to the fullest and enjoy myself as much as I can. Surely enjoyment is the purpose and meaning of life, because I don't believe there's anything else beyond it. There is an unprovable belief here, which is that there is no reality past the moment of our death.

I think it's fair to say, that at some point we have to move from a collection of facts to an understanding of truth. Maybe a good definition of maturity is being able to do just that -- to process what we see happening in the world around us, and put it together into a believe system which gives us our purpose in life. That's certainly what it means to have mature faith. Mature faith is grounded in the acceptance of deep abiding truths about how we are called to live our lives, truths about what it means to worship God and to love Him with all our hearts, our minds and souls, and to love our neighbors as ourselves--regardless of the facts of life which present themselves to us. Regardless of who wins the contests we set up for ourselves, on the football field or anywhere else. We have to move beyond a collection of facts to an understanding of truth.

In order to do this, a shift has to take place: there is an action which takes place on our part; we must accept the invitation to "come and see" just as Nathanael did when he was invited to "come and see" this man from Nazareth. The facts are presented to us, and from there we come to recognize a truth which we may claim, but even more which claims us. We go from knowing, to being known. We go from "Come and See," to "You will see greater things than these." Nathanael's life is given new meaning now as a follower of Jesus, and so should our lives be given new meaning.

Everyone of us has to sort through the facts of life to arrive at truth. And once we do, that truth has a claim on us, not the other way around. We don't really determine the bigger truths, but they do determine us. They make us who we are. God is still creating--still creating us.

Remember how Rick Riley said Tim Tebow's practice of spending time with people before games makes "no football sense." Go ahead and let your own life make no sense. Let go of the victories and losses which make up the facts of your life up to this point, and let yourself be given a new purpose in the truth of God. Let God's truth claim you first and foremost as a child of God, as a brother or sister to the person sitting next to you, and as a follower of Jesus. This is the only truth that matters.