

SILENT SIDELINES

I recently read a poll conducted by the Barna research group in which adults were asked to list their most frequent topics of conversation. The most commonly offered response was movies or television, listed by 66% of the respondents. The second most frequently discussed topic, named by 57% of those polled, was money. And at number three, ahead of politics, parenting, moral issues and spiritual beliefs, were sports. 55% of those polled listed sports as their most frequent topic of conversation.

There can be little question we are obsessed with sports as a nation. It used to be the province of men and boys, but not so today. Women and girls are just as often participants in or fans of a wide array of athletic games. In my family even my eighty-four year old mother-in-law regularly watches NASCAR races! She even has a favorite driver!

With so much interest in sports it is no wonder that we preachers often make liberal use of sports related metaphors and illustrations. Sometimes carried to extremes. A Lutheran friend of mine seems to always weave at least one story about his days as a college football player into every sermon. It doesn't seem to matter what he was talking about, he can find a football story to bring home the point. "In Biblical times," he might say, "keeping kosher, of course, meant not eating pork, which reminds me of my days tossing about the old pigskin."

While it is true that I have been known to refer to my beloved Boston red Sox from time to time, in general, I am careful not to use too many sports related analogies and illustrations because some folks just aren't interested in sports at all, and I'd hate to leave them out.

That said, sometimes it just can't be avoided, and this is one of those times. After all across the world millions and millions of fans are caught up in the excitement of the World Cup Finals.

It only happens every four years, but when it does, thirty-two teams, representing thirty-two countries, come together for a four-week series of soccer games to determine the best team in the world. The matches are watched by more people than any other televised sporting event—even the Superbowl!

There is a very clever and well-written book by Franklin Foer called *How Soccer Explains the World*. That may be a bit of a stretch! But I do think soccer can help explain our scripture reading from Ecclesiastes.

This lesson is one of the best known passages in the Bible. Not only that, it is also one of the most beloved. It is not uncommon to hear it read at funerals as well as at weddings.

It is a poem of balances—life and death, sowing and reaping, silence and speech. To the ancient Jews who first heard these words, they said quite clearly: everything has a time and place in God’s divine scheme. If one reads the whole book of Ecclesiastes, it may seem that this passage not only means that there is a divine order and plan, but also that we can’t do anything about it. But is that the only way we can respond to this passage? Does it really mean all we can do is let the chips fall where they may? Is it simply a paean in praise of predestination? Does it mean we should live passively—as mere pawns in some cosmic drama?

Not necessarily. There are other ways to view it. One scholar writes: “One can hear in this poem a challenge to be wise, to be ethical, to discern what one’s actions are in keeping with God’s time and then to act decisively.” (Sibley Towner, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, V: 308)

This morning we are honoring our graduating high school seniors. Few would argue that this is one of those significant times in life where there are great changes in store. Great changes for the graduates and great changes for their families as well.

For young people, college brings with it a whole new level of independence and adult responsibility. And for their parents it becomes a time of letting go. Letting go of any last vestiges of control, letting go of any real ability to monitor or direct. And for most parents (and many young people as well) this is a rather unsettling prospect. For some, it unsettles the rest of their lives!

But, says the author of Ecclesiastes, “there is a time for every purpose under heaven.” (3:1) And our task is to be wise enough to discern how we act in response to the various situations life presents.

And this is where soccer comes in to play.

Many of the children in our congregation have at one time or another played in soccer leagues. Various groups, ranging from developmental leagues for the tiniest of tots, to leagues for varsity school teams, bring thousands of children onto fields all across the region. And with the kids, often come their parents.

Some parents get involved as coaches. Some serve as officials. But most simply stand or sit on the sidelines and cheer on their sons and daughters.

But sometimes folks get carried away. They loudly offer non-stop advice to the players. They chide the referees. All of which can be enormously distracting to the players themselves. In a recent article in the *Times* a girl told a reporter:

“Sometimes when they tell me to move over or get in my position it gets annoying, because I’m trying to play the game.” (New York Times, 5-28-06, CT-6)

One boy took it upon himself to write a letter to the Connecticut Junior Soccer Association to register a complaint. He wanted to have the chance to play without being shouted at all the time.

The Association took his letter seriously, and instituted a new policy. Twice a year all teams in the Association would observe Silent Sidelines Weekends. The Association’s guidelines read: “Spectators are to be quiet, talking in a normal tone to the person next to them. What are to be avoided are any comments that can be heard by the players, referees or opponents. Applause is permitted and encouraged.” (*Ibid*)

There is, says Ecclesiastes, “a time for silence.” (3:7)

The purpose of the Silent Sidelines Weekends is quite simple: it allows the players the opportunity to really play their own games. As one Westport coach put it: “With less involvement from the sidelines, it allows the [players] to organize, encourage and police themselves.” (*Ibid*)

Those of us who are parents usually feel the need to do all we can to instruct and support our children. We want them to do well. We want them to succeed. Most importantly, we want them to be happy.

And that is all very appropriate, especially on Father’s Day.

But there does come a time when they need to go out and do it on their own. Without Mom or Dad shouting instructions all the time.

There is a time for speech.

But there is also a time for silence.

Don’t misunderstand. Words of encouragement and support are always welcome. And if requested, advice as well. But post-high-school, the game of parenting is all about silent sidelines. It is all about letting go and trusting: trusting the work you have done as a parent in the first eighteen years; trusting God to be with them, trusting your children to play the game on their own.

It is the only way they can learn how it’s done.

The amazing thing, of course, more often than not all the years of parenting, of coaching, pay off! And when they go out on their own, our young people often demonstrate a great level of maturity.

Columnist John Hourihan learned that quite recently.

Hourihan was coaching the JV soccer team. One of his players was a fifteen year old Korean-American adoptee named Nick.

It was halfway through the season, and they were playing Sutton, one of the best teams in the area.

As Hourihan huddled with the team he read his list of starting players for the game.

“Start me!” Nick said with real force, “I have to start.” Hourihan writes, “He was a great student and a great kid. I would give him this much, but I would watch him.”

Nick played with an intensity and a ferocity seldom seen. He raced up and down the field as if he would never tire out. He clung to the ball for his very life.

Hourihan and the schools athletic director began to wonder what was going on. Was the kid on drugs? Did he hate a player on the other team? Did he have a fight in school? Was he trying to keep up with his twin brother, Alex, who was a varsity player?

Then Nick scored a goal. But he didn’t pause to give out a cheer or to celebrate his feat. Instead, he grabbed the ball and took it to midfield and set it up for the kickoff.

Finally the game was over. Hourihan’s team lost. 2-1. He writes: “At the end of the match Nick sat down on the field.

“He had played an incredible game. [But he was bleeding from both knees, was covered with dirt and scrapes. His shirt was torn, his cheek was bruised, and he was crying.”

Hourihan went out to the field and sat down beside him. He assumed Nick was upset because they’d lost.

“You OK Nick?”

“No,” he sobbed. “We just found out Alex has a bone disease. He could die. I thought if I could just win the game”

It wasn’t drugs. It wasn’t jealousy. It wasn’t a competitive spirit. It was love. He somehow thought he could magically change his brother’s fate if they won.

They didn't win. But, as Hourihan writes, "Alex lived. Probably because of the love, not the score." (CT Post, 6-11-06, B-1) A love Hourihan learned about because he let Nick play his own game.

Silent sidelines are a real challenge for all of us with adult children. But they make it possible for our young people to grow up. They make it possible for them to express the love and faith and hope that is in their hearts.

There is a time for speech.

But there is also a time for silence.

There is a time when we must allow our sons and daughters to take the field of life and play their own game. We can, and should, continue to cheer along the sidelines—but the game plan must be their own.

It isn't easy for them, or for us. And it doesn't get any easier when they leave college, begin careers, have families and so on.

But there is a time for silence.

But remember this, no matter what, you are not alone, for God stands with you, ready to cheer the wins and bemoan the losses. Ready to be with you, and them, at all times.

Which may be the ultimate lesson in this passage. For God is with us in every time. Every time under heaven.

**Amen
John H. Danner**