

The NFL of Grace

Matthew 17:1-9

I read that once, during Vince Lombardi's years at Green Bay, the Packers were resoundingly defeated by an opposing team. They did everything wrong. The very next day at practice, Coach Lombardi stood up and said, "Gentlemen, I've seen about enough. We're going to start over, right at the very beginning! The object I am holding in my hand is a football." One of the players, a jokester of the bunch, is supposed to have said: "Coach, please don't go so fast."

It has been told that the Chicago Bears were losing a football game at half time. They were in the locker room receiving some words of encouragement from Mike Ditka, their coach. To graphically illustrate his concern for them to learn to be tough and tenacious, Mike reached his hand into a bucket. He removed his hand with a snapping turtle clamped securely to it. It was not a pretty sight. With the snapping turtle hanging onto his wounded hand, Ditka continued to lecture his astounded team. He assured his team that any one of them could do the same thing if they were really committed and determined. He finally asked for the next volunteer. After an extended time of silence, the Refrigerator William Perry stepped forward and volunteered to go next. Ditka thanked him for his courage and told him he could proceed as soon as the turtle was pried loose from his hand. The Refrigerator politely suggested to his coach that there was no reason to remove the turtle. "Just stick out your other hand and I'll bite that one instead!"

How many of you are going to watch the Super Bowl tonight? It's sort of an American tradition isn't it? You have to watch it, if for no other reason than the commercials.

Today is Super Bowl Sunday and there will be lots of hype and hoopla. There will be a half time show featuring Abel Tesfaye known as "The Weeknd". If you want to hear any of their music you can check with Gary after the service I am sure they are on his IPHONE playlist. And while we're watching the half time show, the players will be in the locker room getting that half time speech from the coach. That moment with the coach where they are pumped up to give it their best during the second half.

The passage for this morning could almost be seen as one of those half time speeches by God to lift Jesus' spirits and give him the courage and strength He needed to go on. Let's look at passage.

Matthew 17:1-9 (NIV)

1 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3 Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

6 When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. 7 But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." 8 When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Not only did the head coach, God, show up but a couple of the most famous former players were there to affirm and inspire as well. Moses and Elijah.

In lives of the disciples, in Jesus' life and this passage, we see the grace of God reflected and at work. You can see it worked out in the NFL of Grace. Not the National Football League, this sermon isn't about football, despite all of the football stories. It's about Grace, the NFL of God's Grace. In this case NFL stands for the Nudging, Forgiving and Leading of God's grace.

I. Nudging

Let's look at the Nudging of God's Grace. This is the grace of God working in our lives before we're really aware that it is working. It is God knowing our name and calling us by that name to get our attention. It is God wooing us with love songs and all the blessings of life. It is God whispering our name and showing us God's great love for us.

It was this Grace, the Nudging Grace of God working in the lives of the Apostles which allowed them to answer the call of Jesus to follow Him. What else could it have been? They didn't know who Jesus was. They didn't know what He was capable of or what His ministry would lead to, yet they dropped everything and followed Him.

Bobby Dodd, the former great football coach of Georgia Tech, tells the story of a game in which his team was leading 7 - 6 with just a minute to go. He instructed his quarterback not to pass the ball under any conditions. He said, "Whatever you do, hold on to that football; do not pass the ball."

In the next ten or fifteen seconds of play, they moved the ball down the field to within 10 yards of the opposing team's goal line. As the quarterback began to execute the next play, with the seconds ticking away, he just couldn't resist, and he threw a pass. As it often happens, the pass was intercepted by a player on the other team. This opponent rushed toward the Georgia Tech goal line.

The entire team had given up the chase - except for the quarterback who had thrown the pass. He had continued to chase his opponent and somehow was able to tackle him. The ball was fumbled and the quarterback recovered the ball. Georgia Tech won the game 7 to 6. After the game, the losing coach said to Coach Dodd, "I will never understand how that quarterback was able to do what he did." Dodd explained, "Well, it's actually quite simple - Your boy was running for a touchdown; my boy was running for his life."

You know what was going through that quarterback's mind don't you? He was hearing the voice of Dodd in his head. Nudging Grace, allows us to hear the voice of God before we ever really know God. It's God Nudging us closer to Him, closer to Jesus.

Let me tell you how we can be a part of the Nudging Grace. Several years ago, Kathy and I plus other members of our church went on a Mission Trip to Chile. In Chile, our church offer a "Women's Day" where the women on Cerro Alegre are pampered in ways they are unaccustomed too and it opens the door for us to share our translated testimonies and they hear the gospel from our Chilean pastor partner.

In Uganda, our previous church provided a "Bucket of Hope" with food and a mosquito net to many villagers who live around the Lulwanda Children's Home in Mbale that softens the heart and hopefully they respond to the gospel track in the bucket.

On the Navajo Indian reservation in New Mexico our previous church built a prefabricated Hogan, a home for a family and we share the grace of God with the family in the home and others who listen because we cared enough to come and give.

Understand, our motive is simply to love and help because that's what we do for people in need. That's what our faith is about. But if we share our love and grace, without any other agenda but to help, then they can't help but notice and ask why. And when they ask "Why? Then we can tell them about Jesus."

Just as God is continually calling and nudging us along in our relationship, we can be a part of God's Nudging Grace.

II. Forgiving

Then there is the Forgiving Grace of God. This is the grace that makes it all real. God calls our name and continually nudges us toward a loving relationship with God. In that relationship God offers us forgiveness. Once we accept God's love and forgiveness through Christ, it all becomes real. It is at that moment that Jesus becomes our friend, our Savior, our companion and our Lord, and not just a name.

Through the forgiving and justifying grace of God we are brought into a right relationship with God. A friend of mine explains it like this, through the forgiving grace of God we're justified and it's "just if I'd never done it." We're forgiven and the slate is wiped clean.

Several years ago, the late Coach Joe Paterno and his Penn State football team were playing for the national championship against Alabama in the Sugar Bowl. They probably would have won, but they had a touchdown called back because there was a twelfth man on the field. After the game, Paterno was asked to identify the man: "It's only a game," he said. "I have no intention of ever identifying the boy. He just made a mistake." That's Forgiveness.

The Disciples experienced that same kind of forgiving Grace there on the mount of transfiguration. Peter wanted to build tabernacles and enshrine the moment, he wanted to stay there forever in the Glory of God. And when God spoke, don't you know he trembled in fear, thinking "Oh my God, what have I done." But Jesus stretched out his hand and offered forgiveness in the words, "Get up. Do not be afraid." You see, God is in the Forgiveness business.

Some of you may know the story of "Wrong Way Riegels." On New Year's Day, 1929, Georgia Tech played UCLA in the Rose Bowl. In that game a young man named Roy Riegels recovered a fumble for UCLA. Picking up the loose ball, he got turned around and ran sixty-five yards toward the wrong goal line. One of his own teammates ran him down and tackled him just before he scored for the opposing team. Several plays later, UCLA had to punt. Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety, demoralizing the UCLA team.

That strange play came in the first half. At half-time UCLA filed off the field and into the dressing room. As the others sat down on the benches and the floor, Riegels put a blanket around his shoulders, sat in a corner, and put his face in his hands. Now a coach usually has a great deal to say to his team during half time. That day Coach Price was quiet. No doubt he was trying to decide what to do with Riegels. When the time keeper came in and announced that there were three minutes before playing time, Coach Price looked at the team and said, "Men, the same team that played the first half will start the second."

The players got up and started out, all but Riegels. He didn't budge. The coach called out to him. Riegels didn't move. Coach Price went over to where Riegels sat and said, "Roy, didn't you hear me? The same team that played the first half will start the second."

Roy Riegels looked up, his cheeks wet with tears and said, "Coach, I can't do it. I've ruined you and the university's reputation. I've ruined myself. I can't face that crowd out there." Coach Price put his hand on Riegels' shoulder, and said, "Roy, get up and go on back out. The game's only half over." Riegels got up, went onto the field and the fans saw him play hard and well.

All of us have run in the wrong direction at some point. But because of the forgiveness of Christ, the game is only half over. We don't have to give up. Jesus is God's way of getting rid of a bad reputation. The Nudging Grace of God whispers God's love to us, and the Forgiving Grace of God gives us a second chance.

III. Leading

Once we've accepted that Forgiving Grace. God's Leading Grace takes over, leading us into a life that everyday becomes more and more like the life of Jesus. That's what the disciples did. Jesus led them not only to the cross but beyond. They were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and then they lead the Church and proclaimed the Good News throughout the world.

It was a comical picture that caused Dad to burst out in laughter. It caused the rest of family to come running to Dad's workout room. There in the middle of the workout room was the pro football players seven year old son. He had dressed out in a full set of Dad's pads and uniform. He had tied a string around the bottoms of the pants and pulled the waistband up under his arms. The jersey hung to his knees. The helmet looked like it had swallowed the boys head. You could just barely see his eyes peeking out. The boy's feet were lost in his father's size-eleven shoes. The little boy said, "Look, Daddy, I want to be just like you!"

That's what we all say when we encounter and experience the love of Jesus. We want to be as loving and kind and caring and as God centered in our lives as Jesus. We want to be as compassionate and as forgiving. We want our lives to make a difference like his life did. We want to touch people with the Good News as he did. We want to be like Jesus. And the Good News is that we can. Through God's Holy Spirit and the Leading Grace of God we become more and more like Christ in our daily lives.

Vince Lombardi wrote a book entitled "Run To Daylight." It contains a chapter on running backs. It describes how football players learn all the plays, and then practice them over and over again until everything becomes practically automatic. And when game-time arrives, they have to remember all the numbers, and all the signals, and all the advice, and all the coaching. But as the running back tucks the ball under his arm and begins to run, he has time to remember only one thing, Lombardi says, to run to daylight. If the hole in the opposing team's defense doesn't open where you expected it to open up and you see daylight somewhere else, you run to daylight. And if you get through the line and the secondary begin to close in, again, you look for the daylight and run for the daylight. Jesus came as the light of the world and providing the leading grace of God, we are called and enabled to run to the daylight.

Conclusion

The late Dallas Cowboy Coach Tom Landry once said, "The job of a football coach is to make men do what they don't want to do, in order to achieve what they've always wanted to be." In a sense that's the NFL of God's Grace. The Holy Spirit Nudges us to do what we don't want to do in order to become what we've always wanted to be. God Nudges us and loves us into a relationship. God Forgives us and sets us free to become a child of God. And then God Leads us into becoming like Christ.

That's the life of faith and that's the NFL, the Nudging, Forgiving, Leading Grace of God. Let the NFL work in your life. Let God nudge you a little so you can experience the forgiveness God offers and be lead to become more and more like Christ each day.