

Wrestling with God

Romans 3:19-28

The “curse of the Bambino” has been broken! It was 1918 when the Red Sox last won the World Series. It was their fifth win of the Series and Babe Ruth was the star of the team. Two years later Ruth’s contract was sold to the New York Yankees. The Yankees had never won a World Series before acquiring Ruth, but since then have won 26. Prior to this season, the Red Sox had appeared in only four World Series since 1918, losing each one in Game 7.¹ Whether or not you believe in curses, the Red Sox and their fans felt like there was some dreaded force hanging over their team that prevented them from ever winning the World Series championship.

Baseball has parallels to some of life’s most universal and most important lessons. It’s not that Abner Doubleday intended to make a theological statement about the meaning of life when he invented the game of baseball. But he did invent a game that dramatizes a very common human predicament – that of trying to measure up to a standard of perfection, and of always falling short!²

The Apostle Paul talked often about the standards of perfection that were impossible to meet. Those standards were epitomized in the Hebrew law. Paul said that the law is a curse – always reminding us of how inadequate we are. We can never be good enough because we can never live up to its standards. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” he wrote in Romans.

Baseball has some similarities. Baseball is a game of measuring things against impossible standards – a game of numbers. Players and fans know their standing; it’s measured in ERA’s and RBI’s and other stats. The truth is that no one does very well when measured against the absolute batting standard of 1.000. The very best hitters get three hits out of every ten tries. That’s not a very good average for most jobs, but in baseball it will get you a few million dollars. Everyone falls short. There’s no way to get even halfway to perfection. That’s the curse of baseball.

But there is also another side to baseball that is more like grace. In baseball, everyone gets a chance to bat. Everyone gets the same number of balls and strikes. Every team gets the same number of outs. What makes baseball fairer than other sports is that there is no clock. Everyone gets their innings without running out of time. They play as long as it takes to decide who wins and who loses. There’s always another game, if not another inning. It’s a game of second chances.

Life is a mix of hits and errors. There is grace in that. Grace means that there will be another chance. Grace offers forgiveness for our errors, encourages us to learn from our mistakes, and gives us a chance to try again. Life is a wrestling match between law and grace, responsibility and freedom, curse and blessing.

Martin Luther was one who wrestled with law and grace. He was a monk in sixteenth century Europe. As a young adult, Luther disappointed his father, who wanted him to become a lawyer, and hence, suffered the wrath of his father.

In his new biography of Luther, historian Martin Marty describes Luther as a “God-obsessed seeker of certainty and assurance in a time of social trauma and of personal anxiety, beginning with his own....Luther was often paralyzed by what he called *Anfechtungen*, an untranslatable word which might be defined this way: the spiritual assaults that keep people from finding certainty in a loving God—attacks of doubt and near-despair sent not from the devil but, quite possibly, from God himself.”³

Luther was haunted by his failure to please God the judge who made drastic demands. He wondered how he could be certain that he was doing his best and that his best was good enough to appease God. He became angry when he realized that God was demanding what no human, however saintly, could accomplish. His spiritual guide helped him realize that God was not angry with Luther; Luther was angry with God. The nature of God is love.

Luther's search led him to consider what authority might confirm this new understanding of God. His spiritual guide appealed to the authority of the church, but Luther was growing discontented with its answers. The church sold certificates called indulgences to sinners who bought them. In return the sinners would not have to make satisfaction for their sins nor suffer in purgatory. This system of penance cultivated the image of a wrathful God of judgment, rather than a loving God of forgiveness and grace.

Another authority increasingly appealed to Luther: the Scripture. The Bible gave him the assurance that the promise of reconciliation with God was true.

The Biblical story of Jacob wrestling through the night with an angel of God spoke to Luther of his own struggle with God. As day dawned, neither Jacob nor the angel was prevailing. Then the angel struck Jacob in the thigh, dislocating his hip, and asked to be let go. Jacob would not release the angel until he was granted a blessing, which he did finally

receive—along with the new name Israel. Luther wrote this proverb about the wrestling hold: “When you think that our Lord God has rejected a person, you should think that our Lord has him in His arms and is pressing him to His heart.”⁴

Luther was also deeply influenced by Paul’s letter to the Romans. He meditated on the verse that says, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Through the gift of faith believers receive divine favor and liberation. The same verse says, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” For years Luther had been taught that God operated with a system of rewards and punishments. Now he was experiencing that God responds to those who have faith, those who trust in God. The experience of divine love, not speculation about God, was at the heart of it all.

Finally Luther experienced the certainty for which he longed. Symbolic of his new understanding of God, like Jacob, Luther gave himself a new name. His given name had been Martinus Luder, which he changed to Luther, and often used a Latin pun, “Eleutherius,” meaning “the free one.” He felt freed from the law and free to receive the saving grace of God.

Out of his own personal experience, Luther saw the need for reforms within the church. He feared that the practice of selling indulgences would create complacency about one’s relationship with God. People would not worry about sinning if they could buy their way out of the consequences.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, his “Ninety-Five Theses.” With this act he publicly protested practices of the church which he believed to be wrong. His intent was to debate these issues within the church, not to cause divisions. His purpose was to reform the church to be about the purpose of teaching the gospel and love of Christ. His 62nd Thesis read, “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.”

Luther’s primary motive was the care of souls. As his soul had been in such deep anguish because of an oppressive system that made him continuously feel condemned, he feared that many of his fellow Christians likewise felt that despair and distance from God. He had claimed the promise of scripture that grace received by faith was the way to salvation. He had been liberated from the chains of bondage and desired to set others free to enjoy the love of God as known in Christ Jesus.

Luther’s efforts set into motion a Reformation of what was corrupt or stagnant in the church. Three years after Luther posted the 95 theses, he was called before the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, to retract his criticism of the church. He refused, saying, in effect, “Unless I am

convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.”

This statement speaks to one of the principles that defined Protestantism in the 16th century: *the Bible alone*. Protestants affirmed that the Bible should be the preeminent guide for religious life. Luther translated the Bible into the language of the people so that for the first time the people could read it for themselves. This emphasis on the Word of God made the sermon the key activity of church life, instead of the rituals.

A second principle is *by grace alone*. The understanding is that human salvation is a gift from God accomplished by Christ’s saving death and resurrection. In the language of Paul’s letter to the Romans, “we are justified by faith.”

A third principle is *the church as the believing people of God*. Over time Protestants came to define the church as the group of individuals who were called out of the world by the message of Christ in the gospel.

A fourth principle is *the priesthood of all believers*. All professing Christians have the privilege of coming before God without human intermediaries. None of us needs a priest or pope to pray to God for us; each of us has direct access to God. Luther understood each believer to be a “little Christ” to his or her neighbors. Pastors may differ from other Christians in their functions, but not in their spiritual status. The church is the priesthood of all believers.

A fifth Reformation principle is *the sanctity of all callings*. The call to a sacred vocation is no more holy than the call to a secular vocation. God has gifted all people that all gifts might be shared for the benefit of the common good.⁵

Luther and his followers were called Protestants not only because they protested problems in the church, but because they took a positive stand for the gospel. The word “protest” comes from the Latin word meaning “testify, declare in public.” Thus a Protestant is a person who makes a declaration, who takes a stand.

We continue in a tradition that encourages Christians to protest, to testify, to take a stand in public. As Luther said, “my conscience is captive to the Word of God....To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

Today we live in a world marked by insecurity and we long for assurance. Many people struggle with their own despair and search for

meaning and security in an insecure world. Many are wrestling with God, wondering if there is a God, and if there is, where is God in this confusing, chaotic world in which we live? Many are wrestling with the nature of God, is God a judge with a rigid set of rules to which we must conform or be condemned? Or is God a God of grace, who loves us unconditionally, but expects the response of holy living?

From the struggles of the apostle Paul, Martin Luther, and John Wesley, we can trust the word of God that we are saved by the grace through our faith in God. Saved by grace, Christians are called out of the world to be “little Christs,” offering the healing presence of Jesus to our broken world. We are called to testify to our faith in our being and our doing, to take a stand for faith in the way we live our public lives. May our conscience be captive to the Word of God.

¹ *Contra Costa Times*, October 28, 2004, p. A1.

² Rev. Nancy Becker, "A Theology of Baseball," May 10, 1992.

³ Martin E. Marty, "Which Luther?" *The Christian Century*, February 10, 2004, p. 31.

⁴ Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), p. 26.

⁵ Noll, Mark A. *Protestants in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 27.

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