

“When You Drop the Ball, What Next?”

Date: February 1, 2015 Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Mark 1:21-28 Occasion: Epiphany 4, Super Bowl Sunday

Theme: Forgiveness, second chances, grace with self

(Adapted from Leonard Sweet Sermons, Leonard Sweet, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2015, 0-0000-1415)

There are two things we absolutely crave in our lives: predictability and spontaneity. On the one hand we crave the comfort of predictability. We work long and hard to grow life in a steady job, a certain career, a consistent source of income.

We earn degrees, save money, buy insurance, invest for retirement. We have a home, a family, a schedule – all of which gives structure and meaning to our days and nights. We build our lives on the secure foundation of predictability.

On the other hand, we also crave spontaneity. We hunger for those unexpected moments that bring uncontained joy and unconstrained excitement to our day-to-day existence. We ache to be astonished and amazed, which is why people love to watch America’s Funniest Videos AND sports on television.

There is nothing like the unscripted, uncut, unpredictable moment to moment excitement of a live sporting event – whether it is football, basketball, baseball, hockey, soccer, tennis, golf or bowling. Tonight, millions of people will be glued to their television sets to watch the Super Bowl.

That’s not such a bad thing, really. The Super Bowl brings family and friends together. It lets us eat lots of good-tasting, if not good-for-you food. It is just plain fun. And as a sporting event, it has absolutely no predictable outcome.

Your team might win big, or your team might lose by hair. Bad calls, nasty weather, one single mis-step can change everything. So, even though the game is ordered by rules and stopwatches, guarded by referees and instant replays, still, anything can happen.

Life is unfair and unpredictable. That lesson was driven home to us this past week when we learned of Carolyn Hanks' sudden death. We try to tame life's uncertainties with long-range plans and short-term check-lists. But life is uncertain and unpredictable.

It's the very uncertainty of life that makes every day such fun AND so frightening. Life is extremely unpredictable.

Say, did you watch the Packers and the Seahawks in their play-off game? Brandon Bostick blew it. No doubt about it. His missed catch after the onside kick in the closing minutes of the Green Bay Packers/Seattle Seahawks game set up the Seahawks for one of the most amazing comebacks in the history of football.

Bostick botched his catch. *But*, this tight end at least went for the kicked ball. He was on site, in place, and focused on victory. It just didn't happen. Once again in life, random chaos trumped the best planning and preparation and skill.

There is not one of us who "always wins." Failure is part and parcel of the human experience. In fact, the best often fail the most. The father of our country, George Washington, lost more battles than he won. One of the most successful companies in history is Amazon. Anyone want to ask Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos about the Fire Phone? Launched with a price tag of \$199, you can now buy one for 99 cents.

Jesus was not a success at everything he attempted. He was also a man of sorrows, acquainted with failure and grief. In fact, what

could paint Jesus' humanity more vividly than his failures? From personal experience, Jesus gave us the secret to dealing with failure. When you drop the ball, or someone shuts the door in your face – you shake yourself off, knock the dust off your feet, and keep moving to the next doorway of opportunity.

In this week's gospel text, Jesus gets a big "win." He's riding high as he heals a man possessed by a demonic spirit. He wows the synagogue crowd to no end with this healing. Amazement and awe washes over them as they realize they are seeing something "new." They are witnessing a remarkable and unexpected form of authority.

It would seem that we could put an immediate stamp of unqualified success on his ministry. And yet, you know the rest of the story. When you catch the ball or when you heal the sick, the crowds go crazy glad. But when you drop the ball, or fail to heal, or do the unexpected, the crowds go crazy mad.

It seems as though Jesus was on his way to the Super Bowl. But his successes came with consequences. When Jesus healed the man with the withered hand, he did it on the Sabbath, an act that made the religious authorities begin to conspire against him.

Another time, Jesus was teaching in his hometown of Nazareth, over in Mark chapter six. You would think he would have the home-team advantage. Instead the hometown crowd kicks Jesus' message out of bounds. "Where did this man get all this authority? Isn't he just the son of Mary and Joseph?" And they took offense at him. And Jesus was not able to perform any deeds of power on his home turf.

Jesus enjoyed tremendous highs and lows throughout his ministry. But he didn't win every game. Jesus was acquainted with

defeat. You and I will not win every game. And sometimes we will even drop the ball. We *will* make mistakes. It's a part of life. Sometimes they're just little mistakes, and sometimes we blow it big.

As much as we try to script our life with predictability, the truth is there is a lot of uncertainty. Each one of us here this morning is facing a week where we will "win" some and "lose" some. This week you will catch some balls and you will drop some balls.

How will you handle failure this week? How will you handle others who have failed you? Do you have a theology of failure? The central claim of Christianity is that we are accepted in our sinfulness; forgiven and understood as we are, with all of our moral confusions, both of intellect and of will.

God knew, understands, forgives and offers us the divine love, the divine mercy. God offers us grace, unmerited and unearned. That's why it's called good news, and not good advice.

How will you handle failure this week? Will you beat yourself up inside, telling yourself how stupid you are and you should have done better? Or will you practice grace with yourself, and be kind to yourself, allowing yourself to be human? Are you able to love yourself even if you're not perfect? I hope so. God does!

And how will you handle those who screw up around you? Will you berate them for being such idiots? Or, will you offer them the grace that you would like to receive when you mess up? We all drop the ball, sometimes. But that doesn't make us or them a failure.

May we love our neighbors as ourselves. And may we love ourselves as we do others – with grace and forgiveness. When you drop the ball, pick yourself up and get back in the game. Amen!