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5 Epiphany

Responding to God

Christian Sheppard wrote the following article in “Sightings” magazine last year about the Super Bowl. It is as true today as then.

Over 100 million Americans will watch Super Bowl XLI today. The game is a national ritual; friends and family gather to dip chips, hearken to our anthem, smile or snipe at the commercials, and gawk at the halftime show. Much hoopla surrounds the Super Bowl, but at its center remains the game itself, violent and awesome in every way.

Yes, football is violent and, in many ways, is about violence --- what former NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue calls ‘contrived adversity.’ Indeed, the U.S. military often explains its strategies and activities in football terms. Meanwhile, players, coaches, and analysts speak in military terms: from the offense and the defense to the blitz and the long bomb.

American culture and football have evolved together with communal ideals as old as the great mythological legends of Homer and others. Heroes always are battling before the deities; virtue and violence come together ... courage for Hector, cunning for Odysseus, and lethal speed for Achilles ... earn eternal glory. As these heroes take their leisure they stage athletic

games (boxing, wrestling, running, chariot racing, and archery) meant to mimic the skills required for war.

In the NFL films , the folksy, ever positive television announcers commentary is replaced by a stentorian voice, the voice of a once angry God grown appreciative, proclaiming the virtues of the NFL players: tenacity, passion, discipline, focus, aggressiveness, toughness, forbearance, and courage --- the virtues required during adversity.

Football is violent enough to demand the virtues of war without actually being deadly. Soldiers watching overseas know the difference: the adversity they face is no game. But football may help them embody necessary virtues.

...The mythic dimensions of football display American ideals, offering us perspective from which we may judge how we wage war, legislate, negotiate, prosecute our laws, and make money --- in other words, how we protect our lives, preserve our liberties, and pursue happiness. Football can thus earn our love and also inspire our critical reflections ... Enjoy the game. [Sheppard]

On this day of cultures' great event can we find a parallel for the Christian life? Controversy has forever been the growth plate of Christian faith. To be Christian means we must learn those virtues of tenacity, passion, discipline, focus, toughness, forbearance, and courage in responding to Christ in our Christian walk.

Jesus knows his work, "fishing for people" and he calls his disciples to venture with him in this cooperative and challenging activity. How can we in our 21st century pluralism follow Jesus' mandate faithfully?

In his book entitled Jesus, Marcus Borg writes: "We are all part of an unending conversation. Being born is like entering a parlor where there's already a conversation going on. The conversation is about life itself --- about what is real, what is worth paying attention to, how we should live, and what 'this' is all about."

This is the invitation. In order to enter fully into the conversation --- and this discipling work --- as adults, we must also

take into account the character-building aspects of our natural trials and predicaments.

For Simon and his partners, the opening scenario in today's Gospel is a sadly familiar dilemma for working fisher folk. They had done all in their human power to seek to fill empty nets through a night of fruitless fishing. All of their training as to when to catch the right tides --- perhaps based on the most advantageous position of the moon, coordinated with the proper weather --- has not brought them success.

On top of this, they have come to shore only to find their dock crowded with strangers who have gathered to hear their preacher-friend from Nazareth go on and on about the "lilies of the field" and other irrelevances to the *real* world they are forced to live and strive within.

The next thing Simon knows, Jesus, who, as preacher might not be the best example of material success, has the temerity to tell Simon, a crackerjack fisherman, to put out into the deep to catch fish that Simon knows are not there.

What could compel this expert fisherman to go back out rather than protest further the uselessness of it all?

Exhaustion? Exasperation? A chance to prove he is right? Or the Holy Spirit. No doubt, some of each of these explanations; and the lines between them (as within our own hearts) is notoriously fuzzy.

However the decision came to be made, there is in such a reaction some level of surrender, and this is something that Jesus can work with. Simon lets go; and before he can “snap” himself back to reality, he experiences --- in this little decision to follow --- the mystery of the Gospel; the Lord showing his power in extravagant abundance.

Dag Hammarskjöld wrote: “I don’t know Who --- or what --- put the question. I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone --- or Something --- and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.”

Simon, having said “Yes” to Jesus and experiencing the amazing catch of fish, found that this life self-surrender is the beginning, not the end. Luke says, “When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.”

The story is told of a missionary shipwrecked at sea, who washed up at the edge of a remote native village. Half-dead from exposure to the elements and the wreck of the vessel, he was taken in by the villagers and nursed back to health.

He settled in and lived with these people for the next twenty years. During that time, he confessed no faith. He sang no hymns; he preached no sermons. He neither read from nor taught any Scripture. He made no personal faith claim.

But when the villagers became ill, he attended to them, sometimes long into the night. When the people were hungry, he gave to them from his own supply of food. When they were lonely, he was available to talk.

He patiently tutored the uneducated. He always took the side of those who were wronged. And there was no human condition among the villagers with which he could not and did not identify.

After 20 years had passed, other missionaries came from the sea to the village and began talking to the people about a man named Jesus. After hearing the stories about this Jesus, the natives insisted that they already knew him --- indeed, he had lived among them for the past 20 years.

One of them said to the missionaries, "Come, we will introduce you to the man about whom you have been speaking." The missionaries were led to a hut, and there they found their long-lost fellow missionary who had been given up for dead.

How do we recognize God's call to follow Jesus? As one once said: "I knew nothing; I was nothing. For this reason God picked me out." Amen.