

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

(01/22/12)

Scripture Lessons: Numbers 11:1-23, 31-35
Philippians 4:4-13

“I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” (Philippians 4:11)

I, for one, am relieved that the football game between the Denver Broncos and the New England Patriots is over. I am also happy that the Patriots won, not only because this allows us to move on to the American Conference championship game with the Baltimore Ravens this afternoon, but also because our one-sided victory proved that God isn't really a Broncos fan.

I guess I really couldn't blame the Big Guy for favoring the Broncos since Denver is 5,280 feet closer to heaven than Foxborough. Denver also has Tim Tebow, who is a Christian, running the offense while we have a quarterback who fathered a child out of wedlock. If God is really a Broncos fan, then the results of last Sunday's game would cast some serious doubt on the Big Guy's omnipotence. I don't think I would want to go there, and certainly not in church.

I suspect you are aware of the Tebow mania that has swept across the nation. Some people are touched by his open expressions of faith. Those that are annoyed are generally of the opinion that one should keep one's faith to oneself and not make a show of how religious you are. These people, at least those who have attended church at some time in their life, generally quote Matthew 6 where Jesus says,

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Of course, it may just be that Tebow's critics are simply reserved New Englanders, who wouldn't think of even *talking* about their faith let alone testifying to its importance in their life. It is interesting that they fail to mention what Jesus said as recorded in the 8th chapter of Mark:

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (Mark 8:38)

This debate illustrates the problem with what is called proof texting: the process of selecting certain biblical verses that support one's position and ignoring others that contradict it. Those who are judgmental about Tebow's kneeling and expressions of gratitude to his savior might bear in mind that Jesus suggested we try to refrain from going around judging everyone who isn't like us.

Last Saturday I happened to note a sign in front of a little Baptist church in Belmont. The sign read: "The Broncos may lose, but Tebow is a winner – John 3:16)." As you know, many football and baseball players put a black grease line under their eyes to cut down on glare. I'm not sure how much it actually cuts down on glare, but it does make them look tough. Tim Tebow, instead of putting a smear of grease on his cheeks, has a black stick-on that reads "John 3:16." As I understand it, when people first saw this on national television over 500,000 fans immediately Googled the reference to see what it was all about. I guess there are a lot of people out there who never went to Sunday school.

I don't think God or Jesus play a role in determining the outcome of athletic events. I know that Adrian Gonzalez apparently believes otherwise, because when the Red Sox were eliminated from the playoffs last year Gonzalez said that God must not have had it in the cards for the Sox to make the playoffs. Many Red Sox fans thought it had more to do with several star pitchers eating fried chicken, drinking beer and playing video games during a game than it did with the will of God.

There is no evidence in the Bible that Jesus ever played football, baseball, or basketball. Of course he wouldn't have played hockey since Israel isn't cold enough for ice and there weren't any ice skating rinks with artificial ice when Jesus lived. There isn't even any evidence that he liked swimming. He apparently preferred to walk on water. So I think that the game last Sunday had a lot more to do with the talent level of the players than it did with divine intervention.

But that's not the point. The point is that before the game there was a segment on how Tim Tebow invites some special needs kid and his/her family to every game as his guest. For this game Tebow invited a young woman who was a sophomore in high school. I forget the name of the disease that has ravaged her

body, has already cost her the loss of one of her lungs, and is predicted to cut her life very short, but it is something pretty heavy. The interviewer mentioned that the girl had already had 74 surgeries. 74 surgeries, and she is just a sophomore in high school. Tim Tebow said, "This kind of puts things in perspective."

I think that was a sensitive, a sobering, a caring, and a humble thing to say. Tim Tebow is a Heisman Trophy winner. He is the starting quarterback for a professional football team. He probably already has more money than God. But he knows, or he apparently knows that it is only a game. He knows that because of his athletic prowess he is a hero to many, but this little girl, because of her courage, is a different kind of hero. As Tebow said, "It kind of puts things in perspective."

I don't mean to belittle the load you are carrying in your life. It may be heavy. In fact, I know that the load that some of you carry is very heavy. Whether the cross you carry is physical pain or limitations; whether it is a troubling decline in cognitive functioning; whether it is emotional, like anxiety or depression; or whether it is the pain that comes from a difficult and troubling relationship, I would certainly not want to demean the load that you or any of us is carrying. All I am saying is that when we come across someone like that courageous little girl who has already had 74 surgeries, it kind of puts things in perspective.

When we turn to scripture for an example of the point I am trying to make, we might recall the account of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. Once again, I know they encountered their share of difficulties in the course of their lengthy journey, but it does seem to me that they complained a lot.

In the 11th chapter of the Book of Numbers, the verses I read this morning appear under the heading "Complaining in the Desert." It begins with the people complaining about their misfortunes. This ticks the Lord off and his anger burns against them. I guess the Lord thought that since he had brought them out of slavery in Egypt and was leading them to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, they should have been a little more grateful, and this gratitude should have taken the edge off some of their complaints.

Even after the fire of the Lord scares the daylights out of them, the people go right back to complaining. They say, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the

fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic,” and all we have is this crummy manna. And the people wept.

Moses hears the people weeping and wailing about their limited diet. The Lord also hears it and he becomes angry not only with the people but also with Moses. The Lord apparently wants Moses to keep the people focused on their goal and realistic about their expectations of comfort on their journey through the wilderness. When the Lord becomes annoyed with Moses, Moses gets angry with God. He complains about the burden that God has placed on his shoulders, the burden of leading a recalcitrant people through the wilderness. Moses complains about the way God is treating him in addition to complaining about the people’s complaining. The people, at least, just complain.

Anyway, God does give the people meat. He makes quail appear. But he is still apparently quite annoyed. We read, “But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague.” The people who had the craving for meat die and are buried at Kibroth-hatta a-vah. I guess the moral of this story is that the Lord has a limited tolerance for complaints and complainers.

There is a verse that articulates what I believe is a healthier attitude, a spiritual attitude toward the times in our life when events or conditions don’t go the way we would like. This passage, which we also heard this morning, is from the apostle Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi. In the 4th chapter Paul says, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” Whether he has little or plenty, whether he is honored or persecuted, whether he has something to eat or not, Paul says he is content. He does not complain.

How is Paul able to do this? In the same chapter, just a little before the passage about contentment, Paul gives us some advice. He says,

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

In order to rejoice, to be filled with joy, we have to accept the life that God has given us as a gift, a gift of immeasurable value. We need to accept this life we have been given with all its ups and downs, pains and pleasures, successes and failures. We have to accept both sickness and health, both life and death with joy. Paul is not telling us that we have to bear our burdens alone or that we should not try to make life better for ourselves or other people. He tells us that “in everything with prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” I think the secret here is in the word “thanksgiving.” That is a very different word, a very different mental state from complaining.

We all have problems. We all have crosses to bear. We all carry heavy burdens. We can complain about these problems, crosses, and burdens or, with thanksgiving in our hearts, we can ask God for the strength and the courage to carry them with grace. We are probably not able to pick and choose our afflictions, but we can choose how we will respond to them, how we will carry them.

In closing, let me read you a description that I received of a little boy who was placed on our prayer list by one of our church families:

Cole has been fighting stage 4 neuroblastoma for 18 ½ months now. He was diagnosed one month after his 4th birthday. He spent the first year in protocol. This means he was going through treatments that have been known to fight cancer. These treatments included chemo, radiation, scans, removal of tumor, and radioactivity. He was in and out of Tufts Hospital on a daily/weekly basis for this whole year. In May his family received the bad news that the protocol treatments could not help him and that his cancer was spreading.

In the summer he qualified for a study (experimental medicine). Unfortunately, Cole developed an allergy to this medicine. It was at this time that Cole’s cancer got worse and his eye swelled up (from cancer in the bone behind his eye) and his hips hurt (also from cancer in his bones), making it difficult for him to walk.

This fall Cole got accepted into another study at Connecticut Children’s Hospital. This study also did not help to get rid of Cole’s cancer. At this time Cole’s pain began to get worse and he was unable to play as he once had. By Thanksgiving Cole was unable to walk much at all, was on round the clock pain medication, and slept about 15 hours a day.

In mid-December Cole was admitted to Tufts and is still there. He spent the holidays there with his family (his siblings slept at the Neely House – in the hospital). Cole’s increase in pain medication has not helped with his pain; he is now completely unable to walk; he has been having seizures (due to tumors on his skull); he has additional disease growth on his spine; he has nerve pain shooting down his leg; and his hip bone is fractured. He has also undergone cranial radiation recently. The

family's updates on Facebook are now less information about Cole and more words of appreciation, thanking people for their support and also reminders to love and appreciate our children each and every day. The last entry in the Carepages ended this way: "Just days before Christmas we were holding Cole's hand and silently praying that he be given the opportunity to be with us for Christmas. We didn't know if it was going to be possible. We are so thankful it was."

When I think of what this little boy is going through, what he has gone through; when I think of what his family is going through, and what they have gone through, I am deeply humbled. This is way out of line. It's just not fair. No child and no family should have to go through this. The town in New Hampshire where they live has been amazing in their support. Our Diaconate recently voted to send the parents some money from our Diaconate fund to help with the expense of commuting daily from New Hampshire to Boston to be with their child. We keep Cole and his family on our prayer list. We all do what we can.

My heart goes out to Cole, who is one courageous little kid who has been struggling for most of his life with a cancer that is devouring his little body, and also to his parents. They weren't asking for much this Christmas – only that their son might stay alive and be with them for Christmas. They are so thankful that he was.

I hoped that I would get a Kindle for Christmas or at least the new box set of the complete Pink Floyd cds. I didn't think I was asking for much, but I didn't get either. It didn't really *spoil* Christmas for me, though I confess I was a little disappointed. These parents weren't asking for much either. They only asked for their son to live a week or a month longer so they could spend this Christmas with him, sitting with him in the hospital, holding his hand on the last Christmas they would ever spend together. The parents got what they wanted. And they are so thankful.

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*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
January 22, 2012*