**A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down**

Tuesday, August 4, 2020

***The Audience***

*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* —Hebrews 10:24-25

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.* —Hebrews 12:1-2

This has been a sad era for the world of sports as we have seen all sorts of leagues from all sorts of sports fold for the season, or struggle to proceed through the restrictions and troubles of this year of COVID. And how badly we need the distrac­tion of sports at this moment! At this writing major league baseball is about to begin, but even now there is so much uncertainty. Several months ago, as the pandemic loomed, some sports were considering going ahead with their seasons but playing before empty stadiums and arenas. Players reacted strongly to this proposal and many refused the possibility of playing before an empty house. As the pandemic descended upon us these same players came to see things differently as this appeared to be the only way that their seasons would proceed.

At first glance it was tempting to write off these discontented players as egotists who could not bear to be without their adoring fans. Doubtless, the world of professional sports is not without its share of inflated egos, but there is much more to the matter of audiences than first meets the eye. A crowd is of tremendous advantage to an athlete. Next to the energy that a player gains from facing the opponent, is the strength which is derived from the presence of the fans. This energy and inspiration is not easy to grasp and define, but it is real! Playing before the home crowd means feeling loved, supported, and very responsible for doing ones best. The crowd makes an athlete really want to play! Playing without an audience is difficult, and whether we recognize it or not, it is the kind of problem with which most of us are wrestling through this whole crisis.

Few of us are athletes and probably none of us have played before a huge stadium full of cheering fans, yet most of us have been hurting through these days as we seem to have lost our audiences. By this I do not mean pendant waving spectators or energetic cheerleaders. What I am referring to is our group of peers. Through isolation, working from home, social distancing, wearing mask and avoiding all crowds we have been separated from our peers – the ones who give us a constant, though often unnoticed energy and encouragement. The terms *peer group* and especially *peer pressure* have been demonized over the years as we love to warn young people against being coerced into bad behaviors and attitudes by the company which they keep. These warnings are totally valid, but they also blind us to the positive side of peer groups. Peer groups are God’s design and He has called us to support and guide one another as family. Peer groups are the audiences which are to inspire and direct our paths. When these basic human ties are broken or disturbed, we lose our audience. We feel a loss of energy and find it hard to play life’s game well without our audience!

The writer of Hebrews addressed a congregation which was drifting apart due to both persecution and some negative surrounding peer pressure. Some of those believers were lax in their faith and tried convincing themselves that they could do fine as followers of Christ without having to meet together. Hebrews challenged that false belief directly and in the tenth chapter of that letter urged them to ***provoke*** *one another to love and good deeds* and to be sure to meet together! (I love that word *provoke*!) Christianity is a team sport and we are deceiving ourselves to think otherwise. [Again, the disclaimer. There are those who are wise to stay away from worship for certain health reasons. Please stay that course of wisdom! There are separations which we must accept for this season, but let us always see the impor­tance of being a gathered Church and seek every way we can to safely stay connected.]

Hebrews holds another antidote to the illness of isolation. In chapter 11, we are re­mind­ed of the heroes of the faith, and in the following chapter we are called to remember those saints, now with the Lord, who are watching us and cheering us on. And let us be looking *to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,* remembering all that He suffered for us and ready to face struggles as He did. This requires the vision that comes by faith.

It’s tough being a Christian without an audience, and it is hard being an active member of God’s family when so many family events are cancelled or hobbled. May we see by faith this *great cloud of witnesses* and then *look to Jesus* who ran the race ahead of us. We *do* have an audience. Let’s do all we can to present them with our best game.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

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*O God, who hast brought us near to an innumerable company of angels, and to the spirits of men made perfect; grant us during our earthly pilgrimage to abide in their fellowship, and in our heavenly country to become partakers of their joy through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

—William Bright, 1824-1901