

The Two Kinds of People (A “Short” Super Bowl Sunday Sermon)  
1 Corinthians 9:16-23 and Mark 1:29-39  
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They say the world is divided into two kinds of people, those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who don't, so now you know which of those two kinds of people I am. But seriously, the world really is divided into two kinds of people, those who watch the Super Bowl for the game, and those who watch it for the commercials. Both kinds, it appears, are loath to miss their favorite part of the event while sitting in church, and for that reason, Christians from both sides of the aisle have asked me to brief this evening. It is hard, of course, to be both brief and thorough, and I am pastorally concerned that by being brief, I may be leaving out one of those two kinds of people. So, this evening, to paraphrase the Apostle Paul, I will become an athlete to win the athletes and a commercial watcher to win the commercials watchers, and say a little bit about both types of people in our two Bible passages. I must say that there is actually a third kind of person in the world, and that kind is the one that asks, “Is the Super Bowl about baseball?” To that person, all I can say is “May God have mercy on your soul.”

On Super Bowl Sunday, we celebrate the athlete, the physical specimen. We celebrate the television commercial too, but it is the game that is played, by professional athletes in their prime, in the best possible physical condition, that draws us to watch it. On this Sunday, then, it seems appropriate to reflect a little on

the body, and how we care for it, in light of Jesus doing just that for Peter's mother-in-law, and then a host of other people. You will remember that Jesus has just made his astounding debut in the synagogue in the village of Capernaum, where he has commanded an unclean spirit to come out of a man who was heckling him as we was teaching. Tonight's story picks up right where last week's action ends, and we find Jesus and his new recruits in Simon's home, where his mother-in-law has been quite ill. Most scholars believe we are meant to understand that she was not simply feeling a little under the weather, but in fact afflicted with some longer-term illness. They suggest this because of the fact that she was unable to serve in her traditional role of serving others, which she is then able to do upon being cured of whatever ailed her, and that the point of Mark sharing this bit of information about serving is to suggest something of what healing is all about, namely the re-integration of the healed person into the life of the community.

Many people, myself included, have been disturbed by the fact that although this poor woman doesn't even deserve a name, she is forced to get out of bed as soon as she is able, and start serving others. But the truth is, as almost anyone who has had a chronic illness can tell you, that a return to any kind of normalcy, any kind of routine, any kind of purpose, is almost a greater blessing than feeling better.

Feeling like you are being a burden to others is just adding an emotional layer of suffering to the physical. All of this is to say that when Jesus enters her home, and takes her by the hand a "lifts her up," he lifts up her spirit just as much as her body.

Well, word gets around quickly, and at sundown, because when he had driven out the unclean spirit and healed Peter's mother-in-law it had been the Sabbath, at sundown, the crowd around Peter's door begins to grow until "the whole city" was there. They are there for some of what the other two had received, a second chance at a full life, an opportunity to return to normalcy, a relief from the stress of being sick, to be less of a burden on their families. Then, as today, being sick came with a price; there is no such thing as a free illness, economically or otherwise. This, to me, is what makes Jesus' ministry of healing even more miraculous than it appears, that he restores life in so many dimensions to those who reach out to whom, and to whom he "lifts up." In the midst of the recent debates in the United States about health care reform, it was easy to get caught up in the partisan politics and the enormous numbers being thrown around. But the background to all of that debate was the very text of our story tonight, the real lives of people turned utterly upside down as both their bodies and a system that privileged a wealthier few failed them. If you cared to read that background to the debate, you read story after story about families that went from safe and secure, both emotionally and financially, to beaten-down and bankrupt by a system that favored profits over a community's well being, families that not only had to bear the burden of watching a loved one slowly die, but to see their children's futures grow dim because they had to burn through every last penny in their pockets before they could receive any public assistance. And that is only to mention the

stories of the middle class in the United States. It would take several Super Bowls worth of time to take a look at the health care disparities and challenges in poorer communities, and even longer if we talked about other parts of the world.

As we watch the Super Bowl, it is easy to get caught up in the glorification of the human body, in the physical prowess of the players, in youth and vigor, in multi-million dollar contracts for athletes. And those things make the crowd watching the Super Bowl, both in the stands and on television, one of the biggest crowds of the year, anywhere in the world. But the image I would like to leave with that half of the world that watches the Super Bowl for the game is of the crowd gathered around Peter's door, and the life to which each of them, like Peter's mother-in-law, is seeking to return: a life with dignity, and purpose, and hope, all things that we, the church of Jesus Christ can do something about if we share in the healing ministry of our Lord and Savior.

Now, the commercials that will air during the broadcast of the Super Bowl are some of the funniest, best-produced, and most expensive advertisements of the year. The cost this year for advertisers is something like \$3.5 million for a thirty second spot. That's a lot of healthcare coverage. I suspect that somewhere in between the beer ads and the car ads, there will be some for various medications, like those that treat high cholesterol, blood pressure, depression, and ED. If you don't know what that last one is, you'll have to go home quickly and watch the game because I am not going to say those words aloud in church. And in those

pharmaceutical ads, you will hear a very long list of possible side effects of taking these medications, everything ranging from dizziness to death. In fact, the list of side effects is usually longer than the list of benefits. But hey, as I just described, the list of people looking for relief is pretty long too, and some of them will be desperate enough to risk everything and suffer side effects ranging from dizziness to death. I hope we are not naïve enough to think that the ads in the Super Bowl are there simply for our entertainment. Of course, they are there to sell us something, and in fact, if it weren't for those ads, there wouldn't be any Super Bowl to watch at all, since advertising pays for virtually all media. I'm probably not telling you anything you don't already know, but I do want to point out that advertising and marketing are nothing new, and in fact, the Apostle Paul is telling us his marketing strategy for getting out the Gospel message in our passage from First Corinthians. Whenever there is a product to sell, and whether we like to admit it or not, Jesus and Christianity are products, whenever there are products to sell, there is advertising.

Paul has a little experience selling the product, this Gospel of Jesus Christ, even if he doesn't gain a penny from it: "What then is my reward?" he asks? "Just this: that in my proclamation, I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel." In the passage just before what we are looking at tonight, Paul has reminded his people that "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the Gospel," meaning that

they are to be paid. And I thank you very much for that. But Paul goes on to say that even though he may be entitled to earn a living from proclaiming the message, he has not taken advantage of that perk. He even goes one step further and suggests that being paid might lead him to think that his proclamation is optional, that he could do another job if he liked, and earn his living from that, that he could be a plumber, for example, and then “woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel.”

And so, freed from those constraints to his conscience, he is free to do his marketing. And what is his plan? The famous “All Things to All People Campaign,” the results of which speak for themselves as we look around this room and remember that were it not for Paul’s brand of advertising, none of us Gentiles would be here. You see, the message he proclaimed would have been unintelligible to our ancestors in the faith if he had not put it into language they could understand. To be all things to all people is not to adapt the Gospel to make it palatable for everyone, but rather in the telling of the story to make it possible for everyone to make it their own. That’s why it’s a marketing strategy, understanding that there are different markets and different reasons people buy, but that in the end, they buy the same product. And so if selling Jesus to Jews means he must act and dress like a Jew that is what he will do. And so if selling Jesus to people with weak consciences, full of superstition, means he must play that part too, and refrain from eating meat, that is what he will do. You see, the product is too valuable to let go wasting away in a warehouse somewhere. The inventory must be moved.

Everything has to go. It's the sale of a lifetime. And the best news is that it's free. The Gospel won't cost you anything except your whole life. It has no side effects except repentance. There is no obligation except freedom. It is too good to pass up and too good not to pass on. It is life, and life abundant, and like Paul, woe to us if we do not proclaim it.

If you go home tonight and watch some of the Super Bowl, you will see some advertising during the actual playing of the game. There will probably be someone in the end zone with the ubiquitous sign that reads "John 3:16," one form among many for proclaiming Jesus Christ. To the football fans, I will become a football fan. To the commercial watchers, I will become a commercial watcher. However, you would, in your way, proclaim the Gospel, go and proclaim it. Do not leave all the advertising to those who can pay \$7 million a minute, because the people who can afford to advertise during the Super Bowl are selling what the rest of us can't really afford to buy, even if we have the money. But we are giving away for free what none of us can afford to live without, even if we don't have the money. May God bless us as we both proclaim and bring the healing ministry of Jesus Christ to a world more banged up than the Patriots and the Giants will be at the end of the game. Amen.