Sunday, August 9, 1987
SOME STORIES HAVE HAPPY ENDINGS
Mark 10:13-16

A little over two years ago, the syndicated newspaper columnist Bob Greene wrote a story about a young man named Greg Talerico. Greg was a 23-year-old man who had come to the Westin Hotel in Chicago to try out as a color commentator for something called the Continental Basketball Association. The CBA is a minor league that, as a gimmick, was holding tryouts around the country for a color-man position on its game-of-the-week cablecasts.

Many of the people who showed up to try out were doing it as a lark. Not Greg Talerico. He was confined to a wheelchair; he had been born with hydrocephalus, commonly referred to as water on the brain, and as he had grown older, he had developed other ailments. He had endured ten operations on his brain, beginning at age three. His limbs had lost so much strength that he could get around only in the wheelchair.

For the tryouts, he had traveled 150 miles from the Center for Physically Handicapped Adults where he lived. When asked why he was trying out, his answer was: “If I could win it, it would mean my entire life. I love sports, but I never could play. When I was a little boy, I used to watch all the games on TV. I’ve never done anything like this before — tried out for anything. But if I could win — it would mean for the first time in my life that I was doing something productive. I honestly don’t think I’m doing anything constructive with my life. But if I could win ...”

Greg didn’t win. He didn’t even make it to the finals of the tryouts. But after the column about him appeared, something remarkable happened. From all over the country, people called and wrote to Bob Greene’s office with messages of support for Greg, saying that his courage had inspired them. It was the biggest reaction to any column that Bob Greene had ever written.

Here are a few examples of some of the letters sent to Bob Greene to be forwarded to Greg.

A woman in Georgia wrote: “I wanted you to know how much the story about you meant to me. For some time now, I’ve had a secret dream to try to be a freelance writer. I’ve never had the nerve or the follow-through to go for it. When I read your story, I made a promise to myself that I would at least give it a try. I couldn’t shake off the image of you sitting in that hallway, going over the guidebook until the last possible moment, putting in all the preparation you could. I thought, that’s the kind of guts and persistence I need if I’m ever going to get anywhere. I don’t know whether or not I’ll be successful, but at least now I know that I’ll give it my best shot.”

There was a letter from a banker in Denver: “Although I have made many presentations in my life, I cannot imagine doing anything as terrifying as being a sports commentator, and I really admire you for being a contestant. Mr. Talerico, you were quoted as saying you had never done anything constructive in your life. But you had a very constructive effect on me and have made me re-evaluate my current situation. You exhibited persistence and stamina by studying so hard and traveling so far for the audition, grace under pressure by performing so well during the audition, and good sportsmanship by congratulating the winner. I wish that more of the people I worked with exhibited these qualities, and I wish that I exhibited them more often myself.”

The most important response to the column came from Salt Lake City. Dave Blackwell, the Sports Director of KLUB Radio, got in touch to say that he was the host of an evening talk show called Sports Club Open Line. He wondered if Greg Talerico might want to become part of the show.

Bob Greene put Blackwell in touch with Greg Talerico in Prophetstown, Illinois, where he lives. Blackwell talked to Talerico and explained that he would like to make him a guest commentator on the program. Greg could simply prepare for the show during the day, and then talk on the telephone to Blackwell with his comments.

The results have been phenomenal. He's on the show at least once a week, and he's very good and very knowledgeable. At the beginning of each week, Blackwell calls the Center where Talerico lives and tells the nurse supervisor what nights the show is on that week. And then Greg will pick out a topic, and that night he'll call collect, and he's on the air.

Greg Talerico himself feels overwhelmed by what has happened. "It's great," he said, "for the first time in my life, I feel I'm doing something. I feel I'm important, at least a little bit. A lot of people around here say that I've changed 100 percent." At first, he said, it was the letters that got to him. "Those people who told me that I had inspired them — I never thought that I could inspire anybody."

Greg is now also taking courses at Sauk Valley College in Dixon, Illinois. He's studying composition and English.

Greg's father has noticed the difference in his son. "You can hear it in his voice," he said, "It's more enthusiastic and full of life. You can tell from his voice that he's looking forward to some kind of a future now. He never was before. He didn't feel he had a future."

Greg's mother said, "I guess this proves that the world is not all bad. Greg got sort of a rotten deal from life, but this whole thing has turned things around. It's clear to me that now Greg has something to live for. He feels that life is worth something."

Greg has sent some of his audio tapes to Bob Greene, the columnist. Greene said, "Sometimes, on those long, cold nights when you wonder why you do what you do, I'll get out of bed and go into the living room and put one of the cassettes on the tape player. I'll sit back in the dark. There will be Dave Blackwell introducing Greg Talerico, and there will be Greg's voice — strong and confident and full of enthusiasm, talking about sports with authority and insight. I'll listen for a while and then I'll go back to bed. But the voice stays with me; the voice stays with me."

Some stories do have happy endings. The story read earlier from the Gospel of Mark is another one of them. The children wanted to see Jesus, and the disciples tried to prevent them. However, Jesus intervened, and not only did they get to see him, but they were able to sit on his lap and have him hug them. And then he used them as an example as well. "Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it," he said.

You and I, like Bob Greene and Dave Blackwell and Jesus, can help stories have happy endings. That's the message of the Gospel. We can try to hinder people, to stand in their way, as did the disciples with the children, or we can do what the radio announcer did in Salt Lake City and what Jesus did with the children. We can be people who extend our hands to others and help them fulfill their potential, and when we do that, we are serving God as well. After all,

it was Jesus who said in another place, “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.” And in Jesus’time, children were considered to be some of the least important human beings. Amen.