Sunday, May 1, 1988
BASEBALL AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH
I Corinthians 9:24-27; II Timothy 4:7-8; Hebrews 12:1-2

All of the passages from the Bible which were read just a few moments ago have one thing in common: a sporting event. In each of these cases, the running of a race is used as a metaphor for life lived as a Christian. Listen to the phrases again: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.” “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which 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.” This last Bible verse from the Book of Hebrews, in the New Testament, could be a fitting motto for marathon runners.

Not only is the running of a race an apt metaphor for life as a Christian, but I believe the game of baseball can also be seen as a useful metaphor. And that’s what this sermon is going to attempt this morning. Incidentally, this spring, one of the major league teams, the Baltimore Orioles, became famous for breaking the record of the longest string of losing games at the beginning of any major league baseball season. Some of us in life seem to have a rather long losing streak before we begin to win.

There are also stories about baseball players which carry their own message. For example, old Honus Wagner is generally conceded to be one of the greatest baseball players of all time. For years, he was the mainstay of the Pittsburgh Pirates. He was the idol of fans and players alike. One year, Honus was voted the most valuable player in the league. Yet that same year, Honus led the league in errors. How could it be that the league’s most valuable player could at the same time make the most errors? The reason was that old Honus went after everything. Nothing was too hard for him to handle. He made more errors than anyone else, but he also made more put-outs. He was all over the infield and outfield. In one game, with the score nine to two against his team, he made one of the greatest plays in baseball. The crowd cheered him for ten minutes, and had he missed the play after his desperate effort, they would have cheered him just as loudly and as long. Had he missed, Honus Wagner would have thrown no pebbles from the playing field and would have gone right after the next hard one.

People who make no errors in life are very apt to be people who do little in life.

Babe Ruth struck out 1,330 times, a record in futility unapproached by any other player in the history of baseball. But that isn’t what we remember about him. His 714 home runs obliterated the 1,330 strikeouts.

Cy Young, perhaps the greatest pitcher of all time, accumulated 511 victories. But what is generally forgotten is that Young actually lost almost as many games as he won.

But now let’s look more closely at the game of baseball itself in order to determine in what ways it is a metaphor for the Christian life. What happens on baseball diamonds may seem to be only a sport, but the pattern of the field and the rules of the game also form a ritual.

The Baseball Diamond as a Sacred Space

To begin with, to look at a baseball diamond, as millions of Americans do every summer, is to contemplate a “mandala,” a design that draws concentration from its own borders toward a center. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung took the term “mandala” from Tibetan Buddhists, who call the mats on which they focus in meditation “mandalas.” Surveying religious symbols and the dreams of his patients, Jung found that the most powerful mandalas involved the number four and multiples of four. Jung concluded that mandalas fulfill a universal, innate need of the human mind to seek a center.

Within every baseball diamond is a mound of earth, a circle marking the center of a square, to which the focus of a game returns with every pitch. The pitcher’s mound is an especially sacred space.

And then between the baselines, all space is sacred; it is “fair” territory, as opposed to the “foul” territory of spectators and reserves. All sports have borders around their playing fields — out of bounds. There are limits built into all life. But unlike other sports, a baseball diamond reaches out to organize the whole world. The foul lines go on forever so that a ball hit over the fence, out of the ballpark, or ten thousand miles away could still be fair. The Christian life tells us that we all have our limits, but there is also an infinite quality to life as well.

The Numerology of Baseball

Fours and threes, the basic units of religious numerology, also inform the ritual of baseball. As Jung pointed out, threes everywhere stand for abstract perfection; the Trinity of Christians, for example. Fours mean completeness or the material reality of the world, as in the four elements of the ancient world (earth, air, fire, and water).

So in baseball, every number that concerns abstract perfection — the three strikes per batter and three outs per inning, the nine defensive players, the unbroken string of twenty-seven outs over nine innings in a perfect game — is a three or a multiple of three. Only when the fourth is added, when the player walks on four balls, or circles all four bases to score a run, does anything concrete actually happen, destroying perfection but establishing completeness. Baseball demonstrates the difference between perfection and completeness more clearly than any phenomenon of everyday life. In a sermon some months ago, I reminded all of us that the Christian faith teaches us that things do not have to be perfect to be good. Baseball reminds us that things do not have to be perfect to be complete.

Adding four to three makes seven, the number of creation. And just as God reached the seventh day and rested, beginning the Sabbath, so the baseball fan stands up and stretches in the seventh inning.

The Rhythm and Ritual of Baseball

A cynic might say that the stretch relieves boredom. The most frequent charge against baseball, its lack of action in contrast to football, basketball, hockey, tennis, soccer, or any other sport besides golf, has obvious validity but misses the point. The essence of baseball is not action, but concentration; not occupation of territory, but circular motion. That’s why baseball is played in a “park,” not in a stadium. And in baseball, unlike football, you don’t cross the opponent’s goal line; but you score a run, you are returning “home.”

The game of baseball is similar to an individual’s life cycle. Baseball has no clock. There is no pre-determined time limit to the game. Years ago, before ballparks had lights, a game could be

called on account of darkness, and still today, in open-air parks, games are called to an end because of rain.

Baseball, like life, proceeds by its own stages, the way all rituals proceed. Whether ten minutes or a half-hour has passed has no relevance to a baseball game. Twenty-seven outs for each team or nine innings is the standard length of a game, but there are several ways, in theory, for the game to go on forever; by an excess of batting skill so that a team never makes three outs in an inning and remains forever at bat; by perfect pitching, so that neither team scores any runs and the extra innings follow each other forever; or by a balance between the teams, so that any scoring by one side is matched by the other, and the game is never decided. In fact, a single player's time at bat can, in theory, last forever if the player goes on hitting foul balls. No wonder Yogi Berra said, "It ain't over till it's over." Incidentally, it was Yogi who also said, "If the people don't want to come, there's no way you can stop them."

The Characters of Baseball

The game of baseball seems to have produced more memorable characters similar to Yogi Berra than other professional sports. Think of Dizzy Dean or Casey Stengel, or Satchel Paige. Do you remember Satchel Paige's rule for right living?

1. Avoid fried foods which angry up the blood.
2. If your stomach disputes you, lie down and pacify it with cooling thoughts.
3. Keep the juices flowing by jangling around gently as you move.
4. Go very light on the vices such as carrying on in society — the social ramble ain't restful.
5. Avoid running at all times.
6. Don't look back. Somethin'might be gaining on you.

Then there was Charlie Grimm, former manager of the Chicago Cubs, who was always good for a laugh, even when his team was in the cellar. Once, when the Cubs had been in a long losing streak, one of his scouts phoned excitedly from the hinterlands. "Charlie," he shouted, "I've just seen the greatest pitcher in the country. He pitched a perfect game; 27 strikeouts. No one could even hit a foul ball off him until there were two out in the 9th. I've got him here now. What shall I do?" "Sign the guy who got the foul," said Grimm. "We need hitters."

The Paradoxes of Baseball

In some ways, baseball, like life, is paradoxical. While a baseball team has the ball, it cannot score. In both football and basketball, you can only score if your team has possession of the ball. In fact, in baseball, like in life, neither team can be said to have total possession of the ball. The team on the field has the ball, yet gives the opposing team the opportunity to hit the ball and score. Also, in baseball, by not taking any action but by remaining aware and by patiently waiting, the individual at bat can reach base by deciding not to swing at the ball. Baseball teams have won games by taking no action — by the batter standing and waiting and not swinging.

Sometimes in our life as Christians, the best action is no action, but simply to stand, concentrate, pray, and wait. There are times when if we act too soon, or without being careful and keeping our eye on the ball, our action will cause us to strike out.

There are other paradoxes in baseball. The game tolerates irregularities. The ethics of baseball actually encourage theft. Stealing bases has an honored place, especially among teams with a colorful character, like the Cardinals, Dodgers, or Pirates. One baseball commentator noted that the Yankees, wearing their banker's pinstripes, have rarely been noted for stealing.

Like most of life, in baseball, enforcement of the rules depends on umpires whose behavior exhibits strange paradoxes. On one hand, an umpire is as solemn as a judge. Unlike the referees of football, basketball, hockey, or boxing, umpires do not chase athletes around; for the most part, they take a post and let the action come to them. Umpires wear classic blue suits or white shirts and trousers, not stripes.

Baseball umpires seem to accept more challenges to their judgments than do other sports officials, and they often respond to those challenges quite actively. The sight of a manager or two, a coach, and an umpire standing within inches of each other, shouting into each other's faces, perhaps kicking dirt on each other's shoes, is familiar to all baseball fans. These arguments evoke strong emotions within a context of intimacy, respect, and nonviolence. At their best, they resemble arguments in a demonstrative family, or a fervent believer's dispute with God. Sometimes the arguments between a player or manager and the umpire remind me of Job, in the Old Testament, arguing with God.

These paradoxes of solemnity, ritual, stealing bases, demonstrate the religious nature of baseball. Our Christian faith reminds us that God is always integrating evil into a higher good. Just as the Bible uses accounts of sin to tell the story of God's work in history, so baseball takes order and disorder, losing and winning, finiteness and infinity into its rituals, and the game becomes a source of joy for all of us. Amen.