

SWING AWAY

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Matthew 25:14-30

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*The Outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day:
The score stood four to two, with but one inning more to play.
And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,
A sickly silence fell upon the patrons of the game.*

*A straggling few got up to go in deep despair. The rest
Clung to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast;
They thought, if only Casey could get but a whack at that -
We'd put up even money, now, with Casey at the bat.*

*But Flynn preceded Casey, as did also Jimmy Blake,
And the former was a lulu and the latter was a cake;
So upon that stricken multitude grim melancholy sat,
For there seemed but little chance of Casey's getting to the bat.*

*But Flynn let drive a single, to the wonderment of all,
And Blake, the much despis-ed, tore the cover off the ball;
And when the dust had lifted, and the men saw what had occurred,
There was Jimmy safe at second and Flynn a-hugging third.*

*Then from 5,000 throats and more there rose a lusty yell;
It rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell;
It knocked upon the mountain and recoiled upon the flat,
For Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat.*

*There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place;
There was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile on Casey's face.
And when, responding to the cheers, he lightly doffed his hat,
No stranger in the crowd could doubt 'twas Casey at the bat.*

*Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt;
Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on his shirt.*

*Then while the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his hip,
Defiance gleamed in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.*

*And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through the air,
And Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.*

*Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped-
"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one," the umpire said.*

*From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,
Like the beating of the storm-waves on a stern and distant shore.*

*"Kill him! Kill the umpire!" shouted someone on the stand;
And it's likely they'd a-killed him had not Casey raised his hand.*

*With a smile of Christian charity great Casey's visage shone;
He stilled the rising tumult; he bade the game go on;
He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the spheroid flew;
But Casey still ignored it, and the umpire said, "Strike two."*

*"Fraud!" cried the maddened thousands, and echo answered fraud;
But one scornful look from Casey and the audience was awed.
They saw his face grow stern and cold, they saw his muscles strain,
And they knew that Casey wouldn't let that ball go by again.*

*The sneer is gone from Casey's lip, his teeth are clenched in hate;
He pounds with cruel violence his bat upon the plate.
And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,
And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.*

*Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville - mighty Casey has struck out.*

If anyone should doubt the place that baseball holds in American culture one need only recite that poem by Ernest Thayer to know that the story of baseball is at some level the story of us all. The epic battle between pitcher and batter and umpire and crowd is a mythology written over and over again in each of

our lives. This month marks the 125th anniversary of Thayer's poem which has as its original title: *Casey at the Bat: A Ballad of the Republic Sung in 1888*. A ballad of the *Republic*...

Lots can be said about this poem, but I suppose in the end it's a simple story of the chance a batter gets at the plate. In the ninth inning for the Mudville nine five batters get their chance at the plate – five batters get their chance to help their team come back from a two run deficit, maybe even to win the game. Five batters are each given the chance to swing at at least three pitches, maybe more, and to put the ball in play and to hit 'em where they ain't and to get themselves on base, or better yet, to clear the bases with a homerun. It doesn't matter what pitcher you're facing – David Price, Mariano Rivera, Nolan Ryan, the local Little League southpaw – the guy on the mound is obligated to present you with three pitches in the strike zone to swing at – and it's your job as the batter to swing. You can pray and hope for a walk. You can pray and hope that the pitcher is a little wild and that four balls will not make their way to strike zone and you are given a free pass to first base. That can be your hope and that can be your prayer – but that's not what baseball is about. No player worth their salt plays the game that way – standing at the plate hoping for a walk. In fact, in baseball if you receive a walk – it's considered a non-event, a not-at-bat. It puts you on first, but it is a statistical nothing. No, in baseball you are supposed to go up and take your licks.

When I was a boy I used to love watching a player named Manny Sanguillen bat. Manny Sanguillen was a catcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates and there was not a pitch thrown to Manny that Manny did not like. He was what was called a bad ball hitter. Pitchers didn't have to worry much about getting the ball too close to the plate because Manny was going to swing at it. He rarely walked. Six seasons of over 475 plate appearances and Manny Sanguillen walked no more than 22 times in any of those seasons. “ The way to fool Manny Sanguillen,” said one opposing coach, “ is to throw him (a pitch) right down the middle. He'll hit anything, but a perfect pitch.”

You know the truth is life very seldom throws us a perfect pitch. Having said that though I am reminded of the story of when Mickey Mantle batted for the last time in Detroit's Tiger Stadium. Denny McLain who had already won thirty games that season was pitching and the Tigers had the game well in hand. McLain got the message to Mantle through his catcher, Jim Price, that he was going to give him a chance to hit a

homerun in his last at bat in Detroit – to throw him a perfect pitch. “What pitch do you want?” the catcher asked Mantle. Mantle told him the pitch he wanted and that’s the pitch McLain gave him and Mantle hit the ball into the upper deck. But the truth is you and I are not Mickey Mantle and you and I seldom get a perfect pitch to hit. Life throws its curveballs. That’s what we say, isn’t it – when the unexpected happens, when the unfortunate circumstance arrives? “I just got thrown a curveball.” I got less than a perfect pitch. But life is not about waiting around for the perfect pitch. Because likely will it never come. Life is about swinging away.

I have to admit that there are enough fiscally conservative bones in my body that when I read the story the Jesus tells in Matthew 25 of the three servants who are given a varying amount of dollars to invest – that’s what talents were – currency, dollars – that I find there to be upon first reading little fault in the one talent servant who decides not to risk, like the others do, investing his money out of fear that he might lose it and have nothing to return to the master when he gets back. It’s hard for me to first understand the anger of the master when he hears of those dollars being buried. Sure, I want to say to myself, it’s fine that the other two made a killing in the market, but what would have happened if they had lost it all. What would the master have said then? Wouldn’t the one talent guy become the hero? I ask myself. “Well done, good and faithful servant, while the market was crashing you put your money under your mattress! You held the bat on your shoulders and waited for a walk!”

But, of course, that’s not the point of the story. The point of the story is to grasp what life is about. And life is not about perfect market conditions. Life is not about a guaranteed bull market. Life is not about a sure bet. Life is not about waiting for the perfect pitch. Life is about swinging away!! Trying to put your bat to the ball even if the pitch is high and outside!

I love that story that Tim McCarver tells about catching for Bob Gibson, the great Cardinal pitcher. At one point in one game McCarver went walking to the mound to chat with Gibson about an upcoming batter and

half way there Gibson yelled to him: Turn around and go back, McCarver, the only thing you know about pitching is that it's hard to hit."

Pitching is hard to hit and living is hard to live. And when you feel in life like you are standing 60 feet six inches away from a 100 mph fastballer – the temptation is to keep your bat on your shoulders. Bury your talent in the ground. Hope for a benign walk to first. That's what the master was trying to say to the cowardly servant – better to go down swinging than to be caught looking. It is perhaps the worst sin of batting. To be caught looking. To let a hittable pitch pass you by. Good ol' Casey struck out because he gave himself only once chance to swing. He got caught looking at the other two. Going down swinging is not the worst thing that can happen in the kingdom of baseball. Reggie Jackson, one of the great homerun hitters of all time, struck out five times for every homerun he hit. And they still called him Mr. October.

The truth is we can spend a lot of time debating lots of things about the nature of our existence. You can talk a lot about where we came from and how life was formed. You can talk about creation and evolution. You can talk about who's right and who's wrong on this issue or that issue – but the crux of the matter really is what are you going to do now that you're at the plate? For whatever reason, life has you up at the plate...You got your three pitches...now what are you going to do with them? Are you going to talk about it ... or are you going to swing the bat? Are you going to let your fear of a strikeout keep you from swinging for the fences?

In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* Isabella is pressed upon to intercede for her brother who is unjustly sentenced to execution for a minor crime and she wonders what good she can do against the powers that be. To which comes Lucio's rejoinder: "Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt." It's the same message that Queen Esther receives from her brother Mordecai when she is given the chance to intercede with the bloodthirsty King for her people who are at grave risk. Queen Esther is deathly afraid to appeal to the king for clemency for her people – and her brother says to her: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this?" In

other words, it's your time at the plate. Your greatest risk is not to strike out, but to be caught looking. Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.

Maybe that's a part of what Jesus was saying when he said that the one who loses his life is the one who will gain it. That is to say that the one who loses his fear of losing his life ... is the one who really gets his life. The one who loses his fear of striking out is the one who swings the hardest. And the one who swings the hardest is the one most bound to clear the fence.

There is a big world out there to make a difference in. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly were the bases we spoke of last week to touch. There's lots of good we can do if we are willing to swing. Not much good we can do with the bat on our shoulders watching the next best Reality Show on TV. Friends, the best reality show right now is the one with you up to the plate . You. Right now. And the "great cloud of witnesses" is up in the stands waiting for Casey at the Bat. Larry at the Bat. Sally at the Bat. Tony at the bat. Mallory at the Bat. Each of us gets our pitches. Some are fast. Some are curves. Some are knuckleballs. Some are in the dirt. And some are under our chins. But the great cloud of witnesses is looking to see what we might do with our at bat.

What will it be? Wait, pray and hope for a walk? Or will the air be shattered by the force of our blow?