

THE FRIENDLY CONFINES

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1 Corinthians 11:23-34

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C.S. Lewis, in his book *Surprised by Joy*, tells the story of his younger life and his journey toward a belief in God. And in the opening pages of his account he tells of what he can remember to be his first experience of something he calls “sehnsucht”. “Sehnsucht” is a German word that Lewis believes captures most the experience he had as a young boy when he encountered for the first time something strikingly beautiful. It was something as simple as a toy garden that his brother had made, but the young Lewis, when he saw it for the first time, was so struck by its sense of beauty that in the moment experienced a sense of longing – a yearning for something beyond, that the beauty represented. That’s what *sehnsucht* means – longing – a longing that comes from a moment of the sublime that goes as quick as it comes and makes us long for the joy that for a moment we experienced in this encounter with beauty. Through the rest of the story, Lewis points to many of these experiences of longing that come from his brush with beauty – whether a pastoral vista, or a Wagnerian opera, or a touching poem – whatever it might be that quickened joy – and made him long for the source from which the joy came. These were important experiences for Lewis on his way to finding God.

I can imagine that you have had those kinds of experiences in your life. An encounter with beauty and wonder that makes you long for that sense of joy that only comes to us in those fleeting moments of time and space.

Just a few nights ago I stepped outside my house and looked up into the cloudless Florida night sky and all I could see was a sea of stars. Stars everywhere, and it was so beautiful and overwhelming and it gave me such a sense of joy. But almost as quick as the joy came it went. And left me longing.

Dr. John Sexton, President of New York University (NYU), in his compelling book, *Baseball as a Road to God* speaks of this sense of longing in a different way when he points us to the work of the 20th century Romanic philosopher Mircha Eliade. Eliade in his study of religion focused on the experience humans have of the sacred – places where we experience, in a deeply personal way, the touch of the transcendent. Eliade calls these experiences of the sacred, *hierophany*. To experience *hierophany* is to come to a place and time where there is a deep sense of sacredness. A holy ground. Something that points us to something not visible, but perhaps more real.

This happens to me whenever I visit the battlefields of Gettysburg. Gettysburg, in one sense, is simply a little town in Central Pennsylvania, surrounded by rolling hills of farmland—that at first glance, appears no different than any other little town in Pennsylvania. But to know what happened there, how many men died there, what speech was given there – is to sense in those rolling fields a holy ground. A sense of the sacred. One is transported to a transcendent plane. Life takes on a gravity there. According to Eliade – “Where the sacred manifests itself in space, the real unveils itself.”

You can, I’m sure, bring to mind some places you would call sacred. The nave of a cathedral. A wooded path. A quiet beach. A favorite meeting place. These become holy ground. A place where we touch the transcendent.

Sexton, a great baseball fan, goes on to say that for baseball fans one such sacred space is a baseball stadium. For it is in a baseball stadium that fans of the game are brought back in touch with a game that likely they met when they were young. When mom or dad or brother or sister took them to the local ball field and played catch or hit grounders or engaged in a game of pickle. And from there it was the Little League games played with uniforms and coaches and scorecards – and then eventually it was the first trip to a professional baseball stadium where we were overwhelmed by the brilliant green grass and the combed dirt and the bright white lines and the walls and outfield stands a million miles away. And it is our return to such places that put us back in touch with something deeper and bigger ... a brush with joy that makes us long for the sense of the real that lies beyond the beauty. Some would call it a longing for the past or a longing for simpler times or a longing for the relationships of our youth.

There are a thousand reasons for why America calls baseball our National Pastime. There is something about this game that puts it in the shortlist of things American: along with motherhood and apple pie.

A lot of this gets captured in a movie that came out a couple decades ago, *Field of Dreams*. Whenever I am asked to name my most favorite movies invariably *Field of Dreams* is at the top of the list. Generally, I am not a sports movie kind of guy, but *Field of Dreams*, whenever I watch it, does a number on me. Many of you have seen it. It's about a husband and wife who purchase a farm in Iowa and they raise their daughter there and acres and acres of corn. Then one day Ray, the husband, hears a voice that tells him to build a baseball field on his farm. Plow under a few acres of corn and construct a beautiful baseball field complete with lights, stands, backstop, you name it. He does. And as a result, all these legends from a bygone era of baseball show up to play: Gil Hodges, Smokey Joe Wood. Shoeless Joe Jackson. They walk out of the cornfields to play baseball again. Ray and his family get to witness all this. At one point he travels around the country and brings back to the field those who, for whatever reason, have a longing to connect with the game and with the heroes of yesteryear. But the decision to plow under his corn and build this field was not, in itself, a prudent economic decision and Ray at one point faces foreclosure on the property. He is sorely tempted to sell the property and give up this amazing somewhat supernatural experience of the return of baseball's greats. As he contemplates this decision, one of those he has gathered to bring to his field, an author named Terence Mann, stands and imagines that there will come a day when people from all over America will want to come and visit this field of dreams. And then he delivers a monologue about baseball and its pull on the American soul. He imagines people arriving to the middle of Iowa and pictures what they will do:

"And they'll walk off to the bleachers and sit in their short sleeves on a perfect afternoon. And find they have reserved seats somewhere along the baselines where they sat when they were children. And cheer their heroes. And they'll watch the game, and it'll be as they'd dipped themselves in magic waters. The memories will be so thick, they'll have to brush them away from their faces. People will come, Ray. The one constant through all the years Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game, is a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good, and that could be again."

So what is it about baseball that would cause it to endure, to make it America's pastime, to be the topic of movies, the arena of childhood heroes, the subject of monologues, the theme of poems, a mythology handed down from generation to generation? What is it that we long for when we step onto a diamond or into the stands of centerfield?

Baseball is changeless, isn't it? It is a changeless institution. At whatever point in time that baseball was instituted – and there is great debate over who really instituted baseball and when it really happened – but at whatever point baseball was instituted with its four bases ninety feet apart and its pitching mound 60 feet 6 inches from home plate and its foul lines that extend for as far as you want to extend them and its four balls and three strikes and its three outs and nine innings and its gloves and bats and singles and doubles and triples and homeruns and its walks and strikeouts – all those things that even if you are not a baseball fan you probably know a little about – this institution of throwing, catching and hitting – that has made farm boys into heroes and superstars into goats – it is the institution of the game, the constitution of the game that has changed very little. Go back not to just the last century, but to the century before that – and it's still three strikes, you're out ... three outs and you're in the field and nine innings given to both teams to score more runs than the other. Baseball is a changeless game.

Roger Angell some thirty years ago in the New Yorker wrote of how he had the chance to attend a college baseball game up at Yale to watch Yale's star pitcher – a kid named Ron Darling. And while watching he was seated next to Smokey Joe Wood, the pitcher who almost single-handedly won the World Series for the Red Sox in 1912. There Angell sat ... next to a 90 year old star watching a 20 year old star – and they were stars of the same game. Nothing had changed.

We long for changeless institutions, don't we? Baseball is changeless.

And as well, baseball is a game of many and equal chances. A changeless game of many and equal chances. Each gets as many chances as the others. Each gets three strikes. Each gets three outs. Each gets nine innings. No one gets to say that they didn't have a chance. It doesn't matter if you are inside the friendly confines of Wrigley or the House that Ruth Built or the dome of Tropicana or the sandlot behind the grade school – every field and stadium is different, each has its own character. But once you're inside and the lines are drawn and the bases are placed and the bats are put out and the stitched ball is located – then everyone knows what the game is about. A game anyone can play. And everyone has a chance. And nothing about it will change until the end of time.

We long for institutions like that, don't we? Simple in their structure and enduring in their very nature and inclusive in their chances.

Could we say these things about what we do here under this dome? Could we say this about the church? The institution instituted so very long ago – long enough to make baseball look like a game invented yesterday? Could we say that what we attempt here has within it its own simplicity ... its own grand history ... its own nature of inclusivity? Anyone can play this game. Everyone gets a chance here. Go from coast to coast and you will not find one church that looks like the other, at least not exactly. Clear window, stained windows. Georgian clapboard, colonial redbrick, gothic sandstone, corporate conference center, vaulted nave, Shaker meeting – it all looks so different on the outside – as different as Fenway is from Marlins Stadium is from Riverview High – but when you get down to it – like the lines and bases of every diamond in America – the church has its own changeless markings and touchstones. Pulpit, table, font. Word and sacrament. Some things are changeless and some things are endless in their chances.

It's what the apostle Paul was trying to get across to the Corinthians – that early church that was trying to make the gospel a lot more complicated than it needed to be. Arguments over who had the better gifts, what kind of food could they eat, what morality should they practice and in the middle of Paul's response to these confused and complicated people – he institutes for them the Lord's Supper. Repeats the words of Christ and says it is as simple as this. Word and sacrament. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. This is what will last. You can have your programs and your building campaigns and your fund drives and your

committee meetings – but the enduring institution is what takes place at pulpit, table and font. “The marks of the true church,” Calvin wrote, “are that the Word of God should be preached, and that the sacraments be rightly administered. This is what they will come back to. This will tie them to the generation before and after. These are the lines and bases. Anyone can play here. All have their chances here. And though the church from generation to generation falls in and out of favor – though there are times when the whole thing seems irrelevant to one age or another – the human longing never goes away. The hunger for hierophany remains. The sacred space is always yearned for.

It explains to me the elder I was once talking to. And he told me of a time when life was falling apart. Family troubles. Difficulties at work. Financial worries. Life had jolted him. His way home from work would take him past the church. A simple little Georgian white clapboard that had been there since the end of the Civil War. And he said that just about every day when he approached the church driving his car, he would slow down and pull to the side. And for a minute or two just sit and look. The steeple. The windows. The enduring building in which hundreds had been baptized including his own. Thousands fed at table. Thousands fed from pulpit. And peace, he said, would invariably come as he considered all of what such walls had housed. The eternal. The sacred place.

This is what we are – the Church. In season or out of season. The gathered who bring their longings. Yearning to be met by something real. Something that doesn't change. Lines and bases. Pulpit, table, font. Believing over and over that it can happen in such friendly confines.