

# MY KINGDOM FOR A BUNT

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*Mark 12:41-44*

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C. S. Lewis in one of his great essays, *The World's Last Night*, an essay about our consideration and sometimes overconsideration of the Second Coming of Jesus, makes a point that our lives are lived like characters in a play. And when you are a character in a play – or a character in a story – because you are in the story you have no idea necessarily how and when the story will necessarily end. When you are a character in a play you don't necessarily know what act you are in – first act, third act, and fifth act. The actor of course knows, but not the character. And Lewis makes the point that the key to life is not knowing the when's and the how's of the end – when the curtain will fall – the key to life is what do you do when it's your time out on the stage. You may be the lead character, or you may play a bit part – but the key is what is your role and how are you playing it?

To illustrate this, he points us to a scene in Shakespeare's great *King Lear*. It is the middle of the third act and treachery is afoot and the Earl of Gloucester is being undermined by his own flesh and blood. A servant of the Earl who observes this betrayal and an attack on his master, jumps to the fore and seeks to defend his lord. He brandishes a sword, utters no more than eight lines, but before he can do much good, he is stabbed in the back by the king's daughter. That is his whole part on the stage – the loyal defense of his lord. So minor a character that Shakespeare gives him no name. But Lewis reminds us ... that in the precious time this small character had the stage – not knowing even what act he was in or when the curtain would fall, he played his part well. He responded to the call. He sacrificed himself for the cause. "We do not know the play," Lewis writes, "We do not even know whether we are in Act I or Act V. We do not know who are the major and who are the minor characters. The Author knows. ... (And) we are led to expect that the Author will have something to say to each of us on the part that each of us has played. The playing it well is what matters infinitely."

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There are lots of parts to be played, for example, on a baseball diamond. There are pitchers and catchers. There are runners and batters. There are fielders and coaches. Everyone has their part to perform, their position to play. Baseball, like most team sports, from a distance looks very simple. Throw, catch and hit. What could be so hard about that? But baseball is a game about how well you do the little things. Whether you paid attention to the things that maybe most fans from a distance have little interest in .

Leo Durocher, that great theologian, once said that “Baseball is like church – many attend, few understand.” Spoken like a true manager, who while everyone is focused on the slugger at the plate, he has to worry about who will be batting two innings later. Who will be coming onto the stage in Act Three, or Inning Five? It is the manager who understands that it’s often the bit part ... and how well the bit part is played ... that determines whether you win the game.

One of those bit parts – unique to baseball is the sacrifice bunt. The sacrifice bunt. The sacrifice bunt takes place when there is a runner on first, or a runner on first and second, and because he wants those runners to be in scoring position, the manager tells the batter to bunt the ball down the first or third baseline ... so that the runners can advance. This is done though at the sacrifice of the batter. Usually the batter when successful in his sacrifice bunt is thrown out at first. He sacrifices himself ... in order to advance the runners so that they are in better position to score on a future base hit. Pitchers are often asked to sacrifice bunt – unless you are from the apostate American League which polluted the game with the designated hitter forty years ago.

From a distance laying down a sacrifice bunt doesn’t appear to be that difficult. Just square your bat – let the ball hit the bat so that the ball trickles down the line and the runners get their chance to advance. You

get taught this in Little League. And yet how often we see a player getting paid the Gross National Product of a small country – stride to the plate, square himself ... and he cannot bunt the ball. He cannot advance the runners. He cannot extend the inning for the team. “My kingdom,” many managers have uttered to themselves, “my kingdom for a bunt.”

Only in baseball do they have a play called a sacrifice. Only in baseball after a bunt is properly laid and a player sacrifices himself and he trots back to the bench after being called out at first – only in baseball does the team stand to congratulate him – because he has done a very important and strategic thing for the team ... he has advanced the runners. He has helped the team. He has made it possible for others, not himself, but others to score. Because in baseball it doesn't matter who scores ... what matter is that the team scores. Interesting, isn't it, that one of the lesser valued individual statistics in baseball is personal runs scored. You are more important to the team if you have the ability to bat other people in – then to score yourself..

“Baseball,” said Mario Cuomo—former governor of New York and former professional baseball player signed at the same time as Mickey Mantle for twice as much—“is a community activity. You need all nine people helping one another. I love bunt plays. I love the idea of the bunt. I love the idea of the sacrifice. Even the word is good. Giving yourself up for the good of the whole. That's Jeremiah. That's thousands of years of wisdom. You find your own good in the good of the whole. You find your own individual fulfillment in the success of the community – the Bible tried to do that and didn't teach you. Baseball did.”

I suppose that's part of what Jesus was trying to say when he noticed the parade of folks placing their offerings at the temple treasury. The rich folks were bringing their big checks and it's all well and good and lots of help will be given – and everyone will know that they are the ones scoring the runs and making the headlines. But Jesus – like the good manager who understands the game – sees something maybe more important to the kingdom. He sees the sacrifice. He sees the poor widow dropping in her two copper coins, doing what she can to advance the runners. She won't end up on the big memorial plaque in the fellowship hall, she won't have a room named after her, she won't get to stand at first base, but she's laid down the perfect bunt and for the little things she's done, the runners have advanced.

And if there is anything that Jesus seems concerned about when he has his debates with the religious leaders is ... are we advancing the runners? Are we finding our own good in the good of the whole? Have we made it less about us and more about them? You can hit three homeruns to the applause of the crowd, but if the team loses, the team loses. And if the team loses, you lose.

My kingdom for a bunt, Jesus says. Have you advanced the runners? Have you sacrificed your at bat – to make sure that you've put others in a good position? Have you used your time on the stage well? Given yourself to a cause greater than yourself?

The great Willie Mays entered baseball soon on the heels of Jackie Robinson while segregation remained largely the de facto law of the land. He was signed by the New York Giants and immediately sent to their minor league team in Trenton, the Trenton Giants and was the first black player in all of that particular league. He met the team in Hagerstown, Maryland and when his first professional game was over the team loaded onto the bus and drove to the colored section of town and dropped Mays, and Mays alone, at a hotel there on the other side of the tracks. The rest of the team went across town to the “white” hotel. Having played in the Negro Leagues up until then, Mays knew team segregation, but not individual segregation. There he sat, a young kid far from home, all alone. Strange place, strange town. At midnight there came a knock on his hotel window. It was three of his Giants' teammates who had scaled the fire escape. They wanted to check on him. Mays insisted he was all right. But they insisted that they were spending the night. The three slept on the floor, got up at 6am and returned to their hotel and saw Mays later in the afternoon when the bus picked him up. They didn't mention it, but Mays knew by their visit that the team was the team and the team protects its own. Sacrifice bunt, runners advance.

Richard Hoffer in his great essay on Mickey Mantle wrote about how Mickey always swung from the heels – in other words, swung for the fence. “The world,” Hoffer writes, “will always belong to those who swing from the heels.” And so it is. But what about the kingdom? The kingdom of God? My kingdom, Jesus

says, for a good sacrifice bunt. My kingdom for two copper coins. My kingdom for those willing to advance the runners. Many attend, but few understand.

I'll never forget a story told me by a dear friend. He was an actor and he left the Broadway stage to try his hand at acting in Hollywood. It took him a few months of auditions and call backs to get his first part in a big Hollywood movie. It was a movie starring Tom Hanks – perhaps the largest box office draw of our time. Not only was he in the same movie as Tom Hanks he even had a scene with Tom Hanks. And not just a scene with Tom Hanks but a dialogue with Tom Hanks. Now I guess when they are making movies when a big actor like Tom Hanks is in a dialogue with a minor character they shoot his part of the dialogue and then they let him go back to his trailer and they put a stand in for him to shoot the other part of the dialogue with the bit actor – which was my friend. However, in this scene, Tom Hanks noticed my friend's anxiety over being in his first movie and realized what it might mean if instead of heading back to his trailer he would stay on the set and shoot the scene with my friend and work him through his part. Coach him. Feed him his lines. Encourage him. Advance the runner. In the grand scheme of Hollywood it wasn't a big deal, a small part for a celluloid giant, but to my friend it was the world. A bunt never forgotten. Runner advanced. Many attend, few understand.

So it reminds me of the time years ago when as a pastor I had to take an unpopular stand on a matter in the church and it left me quite open for criticism. Folks disagreed. Folks were disappointed. Folks didn't really care to hear my side of the story. No fun when they are booing from the stands. No fun when the hate mail gets delivered. But people are people and that's what people, even church people, sometimes do. But it got to the point that I didn't want to go to the mailbox or answer the phone. So another pile of letters was placed on my desk and there was one I was waiting for. A letter from a person clearly on the other side. A good friend who I knew was in great disagreement with me. I cringed as I opened the envelope and braced myself for the invective. "Dear Steve," he wrote, "I don't agree with you, but I believe in you. We'll get through this." That's all he wrote. Just a few words. A soft bunt down the third base line. A small sacrifice of his own ego and need to be right. And the runner was advanced. And we somehow got through it.

William F. Buckley relayed once the story that took place during the fateful events around the rescue at Dunkirk during the throws of World War II – the anxious flight of Allied citizens and soldiers after the Allied defeat at Dunkirk. Ground personnel, Red Cross workers, embassy staff all forced to the coast awaiting rescue from the British government. Every imaginable and available ship, including the old ocean liner the Lancastria, was sent to rescue as many as possible. Once they filled the old Lancastria and pulled up anchor and began their course to Britain, a German bomber dropped a shell into the funnel of the ship and blew a huge hole in the side. The ship immediately took on a terrible list. In the hold were several hundred soldiers trapped with no chance of getting out. While the rest of the passengers and crew were bailing and being rescued by life boats – it was a Roman Catholic priest, a chaplain, donning a Royal Air Force uniform who got himself a rope and managed to lower himself into the hold of the ship, into the gathering of those desperate men knowing that there would be no chance of getting out. So down he went.

When the survivors of the Lancastria made it to Britain and began to tell their stories of the ordeal, the panic and fear while being rescued from the sinking ship – many recounted how close they came to losing hope – but the only thing that kept them going – was listening to the singing. Listening to the singing of those trapped soldiers. The singing of hymns. Led by the priest, of course, they were singing. Encouraged in their last moments. The last two coins given. Runners advanced.

My kingdom, says Jesus, for a bunt.