

BASES COVERED

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Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 25:1-13

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Wee Willie Keeler, a right fielder who played for an assortment of professional baseball teams at the turn of last century – Baltimore, Boston, New York – was at the time – and for all time – one of the greatest hitters in the game. A career batting average of .341 – 12th best in history. He was the preeminent placement hitter. A placement hitter is a hitter versatile enough that he can swing and get the ball where he wants it in the field. When asked what the secret to being a good hitter was, it was Wee Willie Keeler who said that the secret to hitting was, “Keep your eye clear and hit ‘em where they ain’t.”

Hit ‘em where they ain’t.

It may be the most practical and obvious tip in baseball – hit ‘em where they ain’t. Great advice when you have a bat in your hand. And if that is the case then the inverse is perhaps just as true – a good defense in baseball – the best way to keep the opposing team from scoring runs – is to be where the ball is. To put yourself in position for where likely the ball is going to go. To cover your part of the field. To be at your particular base.

In baseball, hitting is always going to take the headlines, but it can reasonably be said that perhaps just as many games have been won or lost because of what took place or didn’t take place out in the field. Lefty Gomez, the great pitcher, once said that the secret to his success was “clean living and a fast outfield”.

The positions on a baseball field are laid out to defend against the law of averages. Players are placed strategically to account for the greatest opportunity to snag a ground ball, fly ball, bunted ball or screaming liner. And the trick about fielding is how a team nuances their positions. When a left-handed hitter is at the plate, the defense will likely shift a little to the right because left-handed hitters tend to hit to the right. When a right-handed hitter bats, the players will shift a little to the left. It has been said that the 1946 World Series between the St. Louis Cardinals and the Boston Red Sox was won and lost not by what took place at the bat, but what took place in the field. That Series featured the greatest hitter in the game at that time, Ted Williams. Ted Williams was a left-handed hitter and could be counted on almost exclusively to hit the ball to the right side of the field – St. Louis employed a shift when Williams came to the plate, called the Williams' shift. They shifted their third baseman to play between the shortstop and the second baseman – so sure they were that Williams would hit to the right. They were right and Williams had a terrible World Series getting only five hits and one Run Batted In, unable to hit where they ain't. The Cardinals put themselves where they knew the ball would be. Ironically, it was in the seventh game of the World Series when the Red Sox were in the field late in the deciding game, that a substitute in center field for the Red Sox, Leon Culberson, did not position himself correctly to be ready for the Harry Walker's loop single that allowed for Enos Slaughter to score all the way from first base and win the Series. It took almost 60 years for Boston to win a World Series after that – strangely against the Cardinals in 2004.

All of this is to say is that one of the keys to good baseball is being where you need to be. Putting yourself in the best place to get to where the ball will be. Every time a ball is hit every player moves to be where they will be most needed. A groundball to first base means the pitcher runs and covers first. A single to right field means the second baseman runs to shallow right to take the relay while the shortstop covers second. A batter shows bunt, the third and first basemen charge the line while the second

baseman covers first and the shortstop covers third. Every player needs to be where he needs to be. All bases need to be covered. One of the great sins in baseball is not to be where you need to be. With a runner on first and the ball hit to second if the shortstop isn't at second base ready to take the throw for the front end of a double play, well then a mortal sin has been committed.

For ten years the Chicago Cubs employed one of the great double play combinations of shortstop Joe Tinker, second baseman Johnny Evers and first baseman Frank Chance. With a runner on first and a ground ball hit to shortstop – the Cubs announcer would call it – Tinkers to Evers to Chance. Each man in the place he needed to be. So long did this double play combination last, as I said 10 years, they even made it into a poem:

These are the saddest of possible words:

"Tinker to Evers to Chance."

Trio of bear cubs, and fleeter than birds,
Tinker and Evers and Chance.

Ruthlessly pricking our gonfalon bubble, [\(a\)](#)

Making a Giant hit into a double [\(b\)](#) –

Words that are heavy with nothing but trouble:

"Tinker to Evers to Chance."

And, of course, who can forget good ol' Abbot and Costello trying to sort out, "Who's on first, What's on second, and I don't know is on third?"

Baseball is about being where you need to be. Insuring that all the bases are covered.

Life, it can be said, is a journey of discovering how to cover the bases. “Have you covered your bases?” is a familiar question that we have been asked since we were young. Life is all about the preparation. “Have you cleaned your plate?” we got asked at the dinner table. “Have you brushed your teeth?” we got asked at bedtime. “Have you studied for your test?” we got asked on our way to school. “Have you combed your hair?” we got asked on the way to our first date. “Have you shined your shoes?” we got asked before the big interview. Have you covered your bases?

Later in life it's questions like, “Have you enough for retirement ... the right insurance?” “Have you made out a will?” “Have you made peace with the people in your life?”

Have you covered the bases? Have you put yourself where you need to be? Are you ready to receive whatever life has to throw at you?

At one level this question about covering your bases is very Darwinian. Survival of the fittest. Only the strongest survive. And the default has always been when thinking about our bases being covered – is ourselves and our family. Covering your bases has always been about protecting yourself. Have you put yourself in the right position – to take care of you. Or to take care of your household. Nothing wrong about that I suppose. We all need food and shelter. But Jesus tries to change the focus a bit when it comes to being where you need to be when he tells us the parable about the ten maidens. The story about the coming of the bridegroom for the wedding and the tradition of the time was for the bridegroom to promenade to the wedding and to be greeted by bridesmaids – all with their lanterns lit. This is Jesus telling a story on himself and the advent of the kingdom – will we be ready for the advent of the kingdom? Will we have our bases covered for the arrival of the Messiah? And it seems we have maidens who have

their bases covered and those who don't. Those who have their lanterns full of oil and those who don't. You can be all dressed up, Jesus says, but with no place to go. Because you haven't covered your bases.

And it would seem, as one takes a look from Genesis to Revelation, that the Bible echoes over and over a refrain on preparation – what does it mean for us to cover the bases in the kingdom of God – and maybe it is summed up best in Micah's great rhetorical question: What does the Lord require of you? How do I make sure I have my bases covered when it comes to the Lord? Where do I need to be to be ready for whatever life might throw at me? Is it the right insurance plan? Is it the right number in my 401K? Is it a certain amount of money in the offering plate? Is it the right score on my SAT? What bases does the Lord look to have covered when it comes to the living of our days?

He has told you, O mortal – says the prophet. It's already there in the law. It's already there in the prophets. The bases are clear to see. What are to make sure to cover? To do justice. To love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly. First base. Second base. Third base. Where do you want to be when the ball is in play? You want to be covering your bases. You want to be doing justice, you want to be loving all things kind, you want to be humble in our walk. These are the things we must be prepared for.

Because, of course, life can throw a lot of things at us. We all know that. Life throws its fortune and its misfortune. The rain – with no allusion to Tropical Storm Andrea – the rain falls on the just and the unjust. But what does the Lord require? Every man out for himself? Dog eat dog? To each his own? No, whatever life should throw is always to be met with justice, kindness and humility.

Every day is different. Every year is different. Every age is different. Who is to know what time and history will throw at us? What changes will occur? What circumstances will arise? What ball will be in play? “Every man to his post,” is what Churchill said to the British people as they waited for what seemed to be the inevitable invasion of the Nazi’s. Every man to his post – and it wasn’t just the military to whom he was speaking. It was every citizen. The homeguard protecting the streets. The night watchmen. The homemakers making do with rationed supplies. Children praying. Every man to his post.

In the bleak days of American slavery when people of color, African descent, were seeking to escape their bondage many came to rely upon the Underground Railroad. Stations along the way where fugitives to freedom could hide from the law. And each of those stations was the simple home, or barn or loft of a simple American citizen who when the knock came to the door and the opportunity to risk a life to do justice, love kindness – humbly put their households at risk to make sure that when it came to the kingdom, their base would be covered. They had taken up their post. Living a while in Philadelphia we came to learn of one William Still a freed African-American living in that city in the mid-19th century who knew that the times had called for him to be one such stop on the Railroad. One such hiding place. One such respite on the journey to freedom. To shepherd people to what they called back then the “Promised Land”. In this instance the Promised Land was Canada. Hundreds came by his way. Each bringing the risk of imprisonment, even a return to slavery. They were perilous times. And when in later life William Still was asked about his participation in the Underground, he responded, “It was my good fortune to lend a helping hand to the weary travelers flying from the land of bondage.”

Good fortune? Good fortune to put you and those you loved at such great risk? Good fortune to be living in such harrowing times? Good fortune to focus your life on making life better for others? Good

fortune to be do justice, love kindness, walk humbly? Well, of course – for that is the point of the game, isn't it? To make sure the right bases are covered? To be where you need to be when the ball is in play?

Will Campbell died this week. Some of you may not know that name. But if you were a civil rights worker in the 50's and 60's you knew that Will Campbell, a Baptist preacher, was the only white preacher that anyone in the Civil Rights leadership knew they could trust. The only one invited to be a part of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Why? Because Will Campbell knew that it wasn't the color of your skin that was to determine whether you were responsible for justice. If justice was to be done, if kindness was to be loved, if humility was to be walked – it was every man to his post, every player to his base. And Will Campbell covered his base well – to the scorn of many of his white brothers and sisters. And no doubt he would have been eager to agree with his brother of a century before – that it was his good fortune? To be at his base, when the ball was on its way.

And yours? What might your good fortune be? What base might you be pleased to cover? It will be different for each of us. The ball is in play at different place in the field. But the bases remain the same – Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly. Plenty of opportunities that each of our histories present. We're all in different places and different times in life. Each of us resides in a different circumstance. But the fortune remains the same. The good fortune. To hear the voice of the master, “Well done, good and faithful servant, well done William Still, well done Will Campbell, well done Bob Fletcher, well done you who sit in these Sarasota pews ... for when the ball was in play, you covered the bases.”