

Lessons Learned
Sung Woo Who?
September 7, 2014

PRELUDE

Worship Songs – Immortal Invisible / What a Savior

Intro Video

Ice Bucket Challenge

Transition/Announcements – Shannon

After Rick gets dried off and warmed up he'll be back to conclude our series *Lessons Learned*. But before we get to that ...

Feature Song – “Centerfield”

Video Clip – “Superfan gets hero's welcome”(2.5 min)

B: KMBC logo and theme

E: Anchor - “Maybe he'll never leave.”

Good morning, everyone.

As Shannon said, we're in the final week of a series of messages that I'm calling *Lessons Learned* because it comes out of several things that I believe God has been impressing on me in recent days. I think I could probably add one more week with one more lesson – “don't let anyone pour a bucket of ice water over your head!”

Anyway, as you might guess from the song and the video we just saw, this final message is not going to be one of the deepest I've ever done ... so let me apologize in advance if you came hoping for a Greek-based exegesis of some part of the Pauline corpus. All I want to share with you this morning is one single insight; an insight that came to me simply because *I'm a baseball fan*.

Actually, that's not totally accurate. I am a *huge* baseball fan. I am an *incurable diehard* baseball fan and I have been for over 50 years.

I grew up in the suburbs of Baltimore, MD back in the days of Brooks Robinson, Luis Aparicio, Frank Robinson, Jim Palmer, Dave McNally, and Boog Powell ... which means that it was a very good time to be an Orioles fan. During my youth, we went to the playoffs seven times and to the World Series four times (in 1966, 69, 70 and 71). I can still remember my dad taking me to the fourth game of the 1970 World Series at Memorial Stadium on 33rd Street. It was the only one in that series that we lost.

But in 1987, when Jetta and I and our girls moved to Kansas City, we decided we were going to go “all in” on our new town which meant for me becoming a fan of the Kansas City Royals. At the time, it seemed like a reasonable decision. The “Boys in Blue” were less than two years removed from a hearty thrashing of the hated Cardinals of St. Louis in the 1985 World Series and there was every reason to be optimistic concerning the future.

Of course, as you know (even if you don't follow professional sports), it hasn't worked out that way. The Royals have been up until just recently – the past year or so – the laughingstock of Major League Baseball.

But that has not dissuaded me in my love for the team and for baseball in general. For some reason (and I know this is going to sound goofy especially if you are not a baseball fan) ... for some reason, I've always felt like there is something *spiritual* about baseball.

- Maybe it was the bonding experience with my dad (who was and still is a big baseball guy).
- Maybe it's because baseball season begins in springtime when everything is coming back to life after the deadness of a long cold winter.
- Maybe it's because Spring Training always begins with the hope that no matter how bad your team has been for decades, *this is the year*. (And I say that every year to my wife. And every year she just rolls her eyes).
- Maybe it feels spiritual because of all the great baseball movies that seem bigger than life like *The Sandlot*. Or the ones that serve as undisguised metaphors for faith and hope.

I mean, who can forget the climactic scene in *The Natural* when a 35-year-old rookie by the name of Roy Hobbs hits the game-winning homerun?

Video Clip – “The Final Homerun – The Natural” (1.8 min)

B: Pitcher comes to stretch position.

E: Roy rounds third with explosions behind him.

You don't need to be a baseball fan to get goose bumps at that point in the story.

And then there's *Field of Dreams* where Ray keeps hearing a voice telling him to build a baseball field in the middle of his farm. "If you build it, he will come" the voice says. So he does. But he's bankrupt and time is running out.

Video Clip – “People Will Come – Field of Dreams” (2.4 min)

B: Mark - "The fact remains that you don't have the money ..."

E: Mann - "People will most definitely come."

And, of course, people do come – and in droves. The farm is saved and, more importantly, Ray makes peace with his estranged father (which was the point of the story).

The Insight

Now, the reason I just told you all of that ... and showed you those clips (other than the fact that *I just wanted to* because it was fun for me to put together!) was to give you a little bit of context; a little bit of understanding of how I see things; of how things hit me when it comes to all things baseball and (over the past 27 years) all things Kansas City Royals.

And I want you to have that context *so that* you might be able to understand why I was impacted by the recent 10-day visit to Kansas City by one of the most unlikely Royals fans ever – Sung Woo Lee – from one of the most unlikely places ever – South Korea! For some reason, I'm tuned in to the spiritual dimension of baseball, so when I heard of Sung Woo and followed the events of his time here, I think God showed me something ... which I want to try and show to you.

I'm curious – how many of you were aware several weeks ago of the “Sung Woo experience” or have at least heard his name?

The more I saw and heard about what was happening to this guy – and it was everywhere (well, if you're a Royals fan *you* saw it everywhere) – the more I saw what was happening to him, the more I found myself giggling and laughing out loud.

- Not because Sung Woo himself was funny. Actually, he was somewhat reserved and seemed a bit uncomfortable with all the attention he was getting.

- And what was happening to him wasn't funny in a comedic sort of way.

Instead, I was giggling and laughing out of pure childlike joy because I realized that what I was seeing was ... well, before I tell you, let me just walk you through some of the things that happened to this guy *just for showing up in our fair city*.

He was greeted by the media at KCI when he landed. Something he clearly did not expect.

He got have lunch with Royals designated hitter and sometime first baseman, Billy Butler. How many fans get to do that?

He received a proclamation of welcome from the Jackson County Commissioners (as well as a Frank White bobblehead doll from the man himself!)

He got to go onto the field, into the dugout and to hang out with the players – all of whom already knew who he was and were looking forward to meeting him.

That actually turned out to be quite funny when he met Danny Duffy. He and Duffy had corresponded via Twitter a couple of years ago and you would have thought they were long lost brothers.

<END SLIDE SET ONE>

Video Clip – Sung Woo Lee Meets Danny Duffy (0.7 min)

B: Sung Woo shakes hand and says “finally.”

E: Duffy says “you can’t leave.”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET TWO>

How many Royals fans get to be THAT up close and personal with their favorite players?

He got to throw out the first pitch.

He was on the scoreboard – and took part in the nightly “dance off” (he won).

And the longer he was in town, the more people wanted to hang out with him and treat him in a special way.

He was a guest of honor at Arrowhead for one of the Chiefs preseason games.

He was interviewed on several radio and TV shows. He even got to do a weather forecast with Gary Lezak!

Someone made a T-shirt of him, sales of which go to support Billy Butler’s “Hit it a Ton” Foundation and the Bishop Sullivan Center

His story even showed up on the front page of the New York Times and the New York Post. (He also got a mention on ESPN and NPR).

And he received lots of gifts as well.

He received an authentic personalized Royals jersey.

He got to meet a bunch of former Royals players including George Brett (who gave him a special silver coin commemorating his 3000th base hit in the final year he played).

One night, he was on the pregame show where he received something that obviously took him by surprise.

<END SLIDE SET TWO>

Video Clip – Sung Woo Gets a Glove (0.8 min)

B: Escobar on second as Rex says, “Our own Hall of Famer ...”

E: Ryan says “the fans have gone above and beyond.”

No exaggeration there. The fans (and everyone else in our town including those who are *not* Royals fans) *have* gone above and beyond, to the point where Sung Woo commented to a reporter, “I’m not sure I deserve all of this. My wife and family will not believe this”ⁱ ... “My friends (back in Korea) keep seeing my picture (in the news) and asking, 'Is that you? Is that you?'”ⁱⁱ

And all of that happened – and much more – in the span of 10 days to one of the most unlikely Royals fans from one of the most unlikely places in the world.

So, what did *you* do on *your* summer vacation? I bet it wasn’t as good as that!

The highlight of the whole thing – at least for me – happened on the night when the Royals took over first place in the American League Central, August 11. This is the moment when the “aha” I want to share with you hit me and I decided to do this particular message. At the dramatic end of a very dramatic game, Sung Woo got to do something that no Royals fan has ever done.

The video on this is not the greatest, but let’s watch. And good luck not smiling or laughing out loud!

Video Clip – Sung Woo Hangs the W (1.7 min)

B: Crowd chants “let’s go Royals” as Holland prepares to pitch.

E: Ryan says “16 of their last 19.”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET THREE>

What was fascinating to me about that was that as happy as the crowd was about the Royals winning and moving into first place, they seemed to be just as excited to see Sung Woo hang the W! It was goose bump territory. And I was laughing and crying at the same time that night because I realized that what I was seeing was *grace* in living color.

What was happening to Sung Woo was a real-life parable (a metaphorical bigger-than-life story) of the *grace* of God offered to the most unlikely of people from the most unlikely of places.

And it was as powerful as the parable Jesus told of the wandering, rebellious son who deserved to be beaten and shunned but was instead, *because of the graciousness of his father*, given a ring and a robe, simply for returning home ... or the parable He told of workers hired late in the day who, *because of the graciousness of the business owner*, received the same compensation as everyone else though they didn’t most certainly did not earn it ... or the parable He told of the king who, *because of his graciousness*, ordered his servants to go out and invite everyone – including the last people who would ever expect to be invited into the palace – to come and feast at his great banquet.

When Jesus told those kinds of stories he would often start by saying, “The Kingdom of God – the experience of turning your life over to God to let Him rule – is like THAT ... because that’s what God is like. He is an unreasonably gracious and merciful father. He is an unexpectedly gracious and generous business owner. He is an incredibly gracious and inviting King.”

And if Jesus was living in KC and doing ministry today, I suspect he might point at Sung Woo Lee and say, “The Kingdom of God is like a baseball fan going on a long journey to a distant land to see his beloved team and hang out with a few friends he made over the internet. When he arrives, he expects to sit in the bleachers and eat hot dogs but instead, to his great surprise, he’s treated like ... *royalty* (pun intended).

- He lunches at Arthur Bryant's with the team's best hitter.
- He kisses the team's best pitcher on the cheek.
- The best players *to ever play for the team* shower *him* with extravagant gifts.
- And on the biggest night in decades of team history, they let him do what no fan before has ever done. He hangs the "W" on the scoreboard.
- And everyone's joy over him doing that is as great as their joy over the team winning.

"*That*," I believe Jesus would say, "is what the Kingdom of God is like. *That* is what the grace of God is like, for the Father gives extravagantly and abundantly to the most unlikely people who come from the most unlikely and faraway places. Not geographically far but spiritually far places of sin and rebellion, of indifference and ingratitude. Like a crazy city that showers multitudes of blessings and kindness on a man they'd never before met, a man who never before did anything for them in his entire life, the Father gives to those kinds of people and for no reason at all other than *He simply chooses to*. It's just His nature to do so. It's to His glory to be gracious" ...

... which is what the Apostle Paul was getting at when he wrote to a group of first-century Christians - those who believed in Jesus as their savior.

God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) Ephesians 2:4-5 (NLT)

Even though we were spiritually far away – dead, actually – he gave us something we didn't deserve and couldn't earn.

*For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness ...
Ephesians 2:6-7 (NLT)*

Those who have received God's grace don't sit in the cheap seats eating hot dogs. We get the royal treatment. We sit in the King's palace at the King's table (or in the luxury suites, to keep the analogy straight).

For God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. Ephesians 2:8-10 (NLT)

God does it all. All we need to do (like Sung Woo did) is to just show up and enjoy the benefits of what Jesus has already done for us. All we need to do, Paul says, is believe.

He doesn't say "God will be gracious and save you when you finally decide to clean up your act and live right" ... or "when you start going to church" ... or "when you feel really bad about how much you let God and everyone else down."

He says "God saves by his grace when we believe" ... which raises the obvious question: what exactly do we need to believe?

Well, it's all over the New Testament.

For example, in another letter Paul wrote:

The very message about faith that we preach: If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:8-9 (NLT)

Here's another example from when Paul and his companions were thrown into prison and God miraculously intervened to set them free.

He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Acts 16:30-31 (NLT)

And another example, this one from the Apostle John.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. John 3:16-17 (NLT)

Now, if we had time, I could give you lots more examples, but I think you get the point. Salvation does not come from anything other than believing that Jesus died for our sins and was raised to life again on the third day. That's what it takes for God's saving grace to be activated in our life. That's what it takes for us to be raised from spiritual death to spiritual life and seated with Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Or, in the words of a more contemporary voice:

"The life of grace is not an effort on our part to achieve a goal we set ourselves. It is a continually renewed attempt simply to believe that someone else has done all the achieving that is needed and to live in relationship with that person, whether we achieve or not."ⁱⁱⁱ

Sadly, that's not how most people see God. Most people have been deceived into thinking of God as anything but gracious. Instead, most people see God as demanding we measure up to certain set of expectations. If you want to be seated in the best seats, you have to live the best life. You have to pay the highest price. "That's how it works in real life," we say.

Conclusion

Except ... except ... it doesn't always work that way, for there are those moments when a Sung Woo Lee comes on the scene and we see a different way. We see grace in action.

And when we do see it, Jesus says to us, "The Kingdom of God is like that. So *repent!* (which means to change your mind; to change the way you think about this; to change the way you orient your life) and believe this Good News. Believe that this truly is how it works ... that this truly is who God is ... and turn to Him and receive grace and mercy and life."

And this morning as we close, I want to give you an opportunity to do that.

And I want to start with those of you who already consider yourselves to be believers. By definition, you've already come to the point in your life where you've said, "yes, I understand what you're saying and I have asked Jesus to be my savior. I believe he died for me. I believe he rose again. I believe everything you're saying."

To you, I just want to say, I hope you've been encouraged and reminded to simply *rest in the grace of Jesus*. Some of you get so worried when you sin or when something happens, you say, "boy, this time, I've really done it. I've committed the unpardonable sin. I've fallen from grace and I've lost my salvation."

But you haven't. Grace doesn't work that way. So pick yourself up and remind yourself that there are no perfect people; and that God has already taken all of your sin – past, present and future – on himself when Jesus went to the cross. And jump for

joy at the goodness of God and his Kingdom. Rejoice that you are part of it through no effort of your own.

But to those who have never accepted this grace that is offered to you in Jesus.

Some of you it's because you've never heard anything like this. You've always thought in your head that you've got to change this or you've got to change that if you want to become a Christian. But God is saying to you this morning, come to me as you are and I will take you as you are and I will be responsible for changing your behavior. Belief comes first. Behavior comes second.

Some of you have been hanging out with us for a long time and you understand this. You've just never taken the plunge. You've just never sealed the deal.

If that's where you are today, I want to help you do that. I want to help you accept Christ and receive what Jesus has done for you.

When I was a young man and I came to this recognition, someone led me through a prayer and helped me put words to what this meant for me. And I want to do that for you this morning. If you've never received Jesus, if you've never received this grace that he offers to you, I want to lead you through a prayer. Pray along with me in your mind. There's no magic in these words just the desire of your heart and the agreement of your mind.

Let's pray:

God, I see it, that in my natural state, I am a rebel against You. I have believed wrong things about you. I have believed that you're not there. I've believed you're not for me. I've believed that you're not powerful, and I've believed that you're not good. This is who I am.

But I repent. I change my mind about you – I reject my rejection of You – and I turn to You. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my sin, that he carried all of my sin to the cross. And I believe that he rose from the dead three days later so that I could have life.

So, Jesus, thank you for loving me so much. Please give me Your Spirit to guide me, to convict me and to empower me to be what you want me to be, even though that is scary and I have no idea where that will lead me. But I trust you because I need you. Amen.

Feature Song – “Perfect People”

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Next week ... we start a brand new series called “20” ... because North Heartland will have been in existence 20 years on the first Sunday of October. So, I'd like to walk down memory lane a bit and remember why we started, what we were trying to accomplish and what we are still trying to accomplish. And we'll work through that during the series which begins next week.

2. As part of that series, we are going to do a baptism on the very last Sunday of the series - the first Sunday of our 21st year, I guess it would be. I'd like to give a little explanation about the challenge we did this morning – there's kind of a connection here. We were very pleased to be challenged to do this, very happy to contribute to the cause of ALS. We've actually had people in our church who have suffered from that. During the first service, a lady came to me and said that her husband had passed away from that and she so appreciated us doing the challenge. So, it's an honor to do this, but why are people doing this ice bucket challenge? Have you ever wondered about this? It's because somebody said “Hey, let's do the ice bucket challenge.” So many people have just jumped in and done this challenge and it's a really cool thing. But, Jesus, many years ago, said, “when

you choose to follow me, I want you to do something similar. I want you to be baptized. I want you to take a challenge. I want you to get in the water as a sign that you believe in me and that I have washed you from your sins.” So, this morning, part of what I want to do for some of you, if you prayed this prayer with me and you accepted Christ this morning, or if you accepted Christ 10 or 20 years ago and you’ve never been baptized, you’ve never done what Jesus said – your salvation is not dependent on it; His grace is not dependent on it – He’s just saying, “Hey, would you do this as a sign. Would you do this as something that says you and I are in this together. You’re in this with all these other people.” So, this morning, I’m throwing down the “Jesus Ice Bucket Challenge.” We’ll heat the water, I promise, it won’t be anything like today. But, some of you just need to be baptized. And we’ll talk more about this as we go forward.

Some of you were baptized, like me, when you were a baby and you don’t remember. It wasn’t your decision, and that’s cool. God has used that in your life but you are at a point now where you need to make that decision for yourself. So, on that first Sunday in October we’ll be doing that. So, I’m just throwing that in your head now so you’ll be aware of it when you hear more about it later.

3. The last thing we need to mention is that we’re doing a golf tournament in October. That’s another one of my hobbies, one of my loves, and I’m not very good at it but I love to play (I promise I won’t do a message on it anytime soon). Our golf tournament is a fund raiser and many of you have said you want to get into it, but just a heads up, we are getting close to the deadline for sign up so if you’re going to be part of it make sure you have your registration form and sign up – deadline is September 19.

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.kansascity.com/sports/mlb/kansas-city-royals/article1088708.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.jacksongov.org/content/3275/9857/10230.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ from Robert Farrar Capon, *Between Noon & Three: Romance, Law & the Outrage of Grace*