

“Overflowing with Hope: The first Sunday in Advent”

Romans 5:1-5

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From my earliest memories, Thanksgiving and football have always been closely connected. Beginning in the year 1966 my family shared a tradition with another family from our small town of Hanford, California. One year we would host the Green’s on our turf, and the next year we were the away team for our annual...and I might add epic traditional football game. The rosters of the two teams that battled are etched in my mind. Wayne and Preston versus Barry and Danny. I guess when you put it like that, maybe it wasn’t so epic. Just four kids tussling in the backyard. But when we would take a break from our athletic endeavors and come inside, guess what was on the television? You know it. Football. We move to Westerly, Rhode Island. Our first Thanksgiving I woke up and thought the rapture had come. There was no one in town. The streets were empty. The stores were shut up. Not a soul to be found. And then I heard roars from the football field of Westerly High School, where the Stonington Bears were matched up against their arch-rival home team Bulldogs in a clash of the titans, a tradition dating back to 1911. Whether it is a backyard in California or a gridiron in New England, football and a Thanksgiving Feast go hand in hand.

In light of that, I am hoping to make the transition from Thanksgiving to the season of Advent via the hashmarks on a football field, and in particular, to use lessons learned from tackles in the trenches to touchdowns and paydirt to explore the theme of hope, which is the first word we encounter on our journey through Advent.

An inordinate amount of time is devoted to football in America. NFL games are played on Sunday, Monday, Thursday, and when the playoffs role around the NFL encroaches on Saturday, the day normally set aside for college football, which begins with Gameday at the crack of dawn on Saturday and doesn’t stop until the clock expires on the final game on the west coast long after those of us on the east coast have made our way to bed, and that doesn’t count high school and middle

school and pee wee and all the informal gatherings of touch and flag...we devote a lot of time and energy to football, and so I sure hope there are some lessons we can learn.

When I first learned how to read, I fell in love with books about sports. I was too young to see some of the greats, but I was mesmerized by tales of Sandy Koufax and Babe Ruth in baseball, legendary basketball figures like Bob Cousy and Bill Russell and that cigar chewing coach of the Celtics, Red Auerbach, and of course the gridiron greats such as Y.A. Tittle, Jim Brown, Vince Lombardi, and Roy Riegels.

Of all the names I mentioned, the one that might be least familiar is Roy Riegels. Riegels was a two-way player for the Golden Bears, the football team for the University of California, in Berkeley. On Jan 1, 1929, the Golden Bears of Berkeley were playing in Pasadena, in the Rose Bowl, the granddaddy of them all. Cal was on defense when their opponents, the Yellow Jackets of Georgia Tech fumbled the ball. Roy Riegels was there to pick up the fumble. Scooping up the ball, he started toward the goal line, which was only 30 yards away. The moment was ripe for Roy to do something fantastic. He was a lineman, and because of the fumble he was now running with the ball on the stage of the most famous college football field in the country. Roy was hit as he ran, but he gathered his senses and kept going. Roy was 30 yards from the goal line, and he proceeded to run 69 yards, with no Georgia Tech players chasing him. Instead, his own teammates were frantically trying to run him down, hollering at him, diving at his ankles, doing anything they could to tackle their own teammate. Roy Riegels was running the wrong way, and he was finally brought down by his own team on the one-yard line. Sportswriters had a field day with Roy. Wrong Way Riegels.

Did I mention football has some great lessons to teach us? Roy ran the wrong way in the first half of that Rose Bowl back in 1929. His coach said Roy was so distraught he did not want to come out and play the second half. Riegels moaned to his coach, "Coach, I can't do it. I've ruined you; I've ruined myself, I've ruined the University of California. I couldn't face that crowd to save my life." His coach simply said, "Roy, get up and go back out there—the game is only half over." How many

people have given up hope because like Roy, they were running the wrong way? When our failures pile up it is so natural to say, “I am ruined. I can’t face others. I can’t undo the wrong I have done. I will always be known by my mistakes.”

Saul from Tarsus never played a down of football. I can’t point to chapter or verse in the bible that says Saul, or Paul the Apostle as he is better known, never played football. But any play by the rules guy like Paul, a Jew through and through, would not have played a game with a ball made out of pigskin, I can guarantee you that. But interestingly enough, the day came when Paul was heading toward the goal line, on his way to persecute some Christians, to carry out his wrath on those who followed Jesus, and on that day as he dashed toward Damascus, a lightning bolt from the sky knocked him off his feet, and Paul found out he was going the wrong way. When Paul looked back at his life, he called himself the chief sinner. As he discovered just how wrong the way he was going was, he might have been tempted to say, “I am ruined. I can’t face the crowd. My past is too big of a problem.” Instead, Paul is exhibit A that you can turn your life around. More to the point, God can turn your life around. God is the God of new beginnings. We have heard this verse several times recently, and today we hear it again, a verse that the wrong-way Apostle Paul wrote, a verse that says, “In Christ Jesus, there is new creation. The old is gone. The new has come.”

My football career never advanced beyond those backyard games with my brothers Barry and Danny and our good friend Preston Green. So, it is somewhat of a fluke that I ended up on the biggest football in our local area, the Mineral King Bowl in the summer of 1974. I was about to enter 7th grade. As far as I could tell my life was going pretty well. I had friends, I had an amazing family, I mowed a few lawns and so I had a few dollars, which back then was more than enough. For all I knew as a thirteen-year-old kid, I was going in the right direction. Then a preacher got up. We were all spread out on the football field and there was a stage up front. Our youth group leaders had loaded us up in cars and we drove to Mineral King Bowl, and now on a hot August night a man of the cloth started recounting how God does not count our sins against us. I don’t remember much about that night, except it was the

first time the idea that Jesus loved us and gave his life for us hit home for me. Jesus gave his life for us because as human beings we have gone the wrong way, chasing our own dreams instead of following God. But what really struck me was that if that was true, then I was going the wrong way. I ran down the center of the field, made my way to the front, someone met me, we said a prayer together, and in a real way that moment, on a football field, is the day I turned my life over to Jesus Christ. What I really discovered that day, and it is a discovery I have made over and over again, is that Jesus Christ has grabbed hold of me, and true to his promise, he will never let go. Roy Riegels, you got nothing on Wrong Way Wayne. But thanks be to God he is turning my life around.

Hope. When we are going the wrong way, when this world is going the wrong way, when life is going the wrong way, God in God's immense power, is able to turn things around. All Joseph knew is that his life was going the wrong way, beaten up by his brothers, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, left to languish in prison, it was all going the wrong way. But hope raises its hand and says, "I meant it all for good," and Joseph weeps as he is reunited with his brothers and the sons of Jacob are saved from a devastating famine. David went the wrong way and slept with Bathsheba, and then he kept running the wrong way and tried to trick her husband into covering for his mistake, and then he plowed ahead and had her husband abandoned on the front lines of battle where he died. When he finally faced up to his failure, David knew how great his betrayal was, a betrayal that ultimately was against God. And yet David knew that God can take our wrong ways and lead us back to the right. David's prayer of repentance in Psalm 51 is a prayer so many have clung to when they felt like a failure, when we felt like a failure. "Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me." Joseph, David, Paul, Peter, the list goes on and on and on and on. With God there is hope. We can go in a new direction.

The lessons from football are not only about going the wrong way. Sometimes people whose fame comes from football model for us what the right way might be. The San Francisco 49ers have always been my favorite team, and we had some glory years with Joe Montana and Steve

Young. Sad to say, our last Super Bowl victory was in 1995. So, I got excited a few years back when Jim Harbaugh took over as coach of the 49ers and led them to the Super Bowl...where of course they lost...but that's another story. During his time as coach of the 49ers, Sports Illustrated ran a cover story on Jim Harbaugh. If you have ever seen Jim Harbaugh, you know he is an intense coach. You see it in his face, in how he shakes hands with other coaches after games, and his passion for perfection. Knowing all that, I was intrigued by the headline on the cover, which said, "Jim Harbaugh is softer—and saner—than you think".

The article begins by telling about a person Jim Harbaugh greatly admires. The man is named Father Joseph Uhen. Father Joseph is a graduate of Notre Dame, and for the last twenty years he has pastored a parish in a city in northern Peru. "There, in outlying villages without sewers or running water, Uhen has built 28 chapels, and he ministers to some 40,000 faithful." It turns out Jim Harbaugh is a devout Catholic, and for the last five years he takes a week during the off-season and he spends time with Father Joseph in Peru, "doing the mission's work—delivering food to the needy, helping out at an orphanage or building bamboo houses....Father Jose, as Uhen is known by his flock, has seen Harbaugh literally give villagers the shirt (and hoodie) off his back. He has a picture of the coach walking out of a prison in his stocking feet; Harbaugh had befriended an inmate and given the man his shoes. Uhen recalls delivering food to a house where another old man lay on the dirt floor, near death. Harbaugh gently picked him up and carried him to a car."¹ Giving the shoes off your feet and the shirt off you back, giving food to the hungry, gently carrying a man who is near death...through an article about football in a magazine devoted to athletics...the writer takes full advantage of preaching a sermon that sounds a lot like the one Jesus told in Matthew 25...I was hungry and you fed me, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me.

Back in those Thanksgiving days of my childhood when I would team up with Preston Green and try to put a whipping on my brothers, I

¹ Article by Austin Murphy in Sports Illustrated, December 9, 2013, p. 48.

had dreams of glory, dreams that someday I might be a football star. Preston Green's dad, also named Preston Green, helped fuel the flames of those dreams. My dad was not a big sports fan, but Mr. Green loved professional sports. Because of Mr. Green, there was a glorious fall day in 1971 when Mr. Green, his namesake son Preston, my brother Barry, my dad, and little old Wayne Eberly drove to the Los Angeles Coliseum and watched a professional football game in person. That is a day I will never forget. Mr. Green helped me to have a dream come true.

In a much more profound way, Mr. Green helped me to have a dream that I still hope will come true. I long ago gave up any dreams of glory related to football. But because of Mr. Green, and my dad, Carl Eberly, there is a dream that still lives in my heart. It is a dream much greater than football, but like football, it is a dream intimately related to Thanksgiving Day.

The dream began for me when I sat at our Thanksgiving table as a five-year-old boy. It was 1966, and our little town was in the middle of the racial struggles that marked our nation during those days. North of the freeway there were lots of whites. South of the freeway there were lots of blacks. Tension was running high. A family moved into our town, the Green family. I have mentioned the Green family numerous times this morning, but I have left out a very important detail. The important detail is one that I wish with all my heart did not matter. But it does. The detail mattered in 1966 and I am sad to say, the detail still matters today. The detail I have left out thus far is that Preston Green and his family were black. My dad met Mr. Green and did something really wonderful. He invited Preston Green and his family to have Thanksgiving dinner with us. On Thanksgiving Day, 1966 the Greens crossed that dividing line called the freeway and drove down Fitzgerald Lane and had dinner with the Eberlys.

When Thanksgiving rolled around the next year, Mr. Green called and invited the Eberlys over. For Thanksgiving Day of 1967, we crossed that dividing line called the freeway and drove into the Home Garden neighborhood and had Thanksgiving with the Greens. And every year

we would alternate between homes, the Eberlys and the Greens, always sharing Thanksgiving together.

A highlight of the meal was when Mr. Green would make his annual speech. The turkey had been whittled down to just a few bones, the piles of mashed potatoes had been consumed, we had feasted on Mrs. Green's famous Coca-Cola jello salad, and so much pumpkin pie had been stuffed in our guts that they were about to explode. It was then that Mr. Green would push back his chair and begin. It was always the same. Speaking to my father, he would say, "Well, Carl, I guess it was back in 1966 that the Eberlys first had the Greens over for Thanksgiving dinner. And every year we have been sharing this fine meal together." It was so predictable that when my brother and I got to be teenagers, we would have fun and mimic Mr. Green. When he would lean back, so would we. When he would say his speech, our lips would silently mouth the words with him in perfect unison, "Well, Carl, I guess it was back in 1966...."

I will never forget the first Thanksgiving after our son was born. It was 1985. We drove down from Sacramento for Thanksgiving dinner. The Greens were there. We threw the football, we visited, we admired the babies. Then we sat down to eat. We whittled the turkey down to just a few bones. We consumed mounds of mashed potatoes. Mrs. Green's Coca-Cola salad was as good as ever. And even though our bellies were full we kept stuffing our faces with pumpkin pie. Sure enough, Mr. Green leaned back in his chair. I knew what was coming. It was so predictable. It was like clockwork. Mr. Green leaned back in his chair...but now I didn't lean back and mimic him. Instead, I watched with a strange wonder and awe, a profound sense of humility and gratitude. That year when Mr. Green said, "Well, Carl, I guess it was back in 1966 that the Eberlys first had the Greens over for Thanksgiving dinner," I didn't joke around at all. I just looked at my dad and I looked at Mr. Green. Without ever making a big deal about it, those two men had helped me to accept people whose skin was a different color than mine. Then I looked at my son, just a baby boy. I said to myself, "I hope that when my son grows up, he will look at me and be able to say, 'my

dad taught me how to love and respect people of all races and religions, of all color and creed.””

What I hoped that day for my son is the hope I continue to have for all the children of this earth. I hope that we will come to see that all people are loved by God. People going the wrong direction can turn their lives around, because Jesus Christ has given his life so that we can have a new beginning. I hope that people will devote themselves to serving others, like a famous football coach who set aside his whistle and his sweatpants to help the poor in northern Peru...or better yet, like the Son of God who took off his outer garments and wrapped a towel around his waist and began to wash the feet of his disciples, because that is what servants do. And I hope that just like Paul the Apostle promised, I hope that one day every dividing wall of hostility, racial, economic, social, national...you name it, I hope that every dividing wall of hostility will fall, and just like a prophet dreamed so long ago, the wolf will live with the lamb, and there will be peace on earth. I hope...I hope...I hope...and this Advent...I hope you will be filled with hope. For with God, all things are possible. Come, oh come to us, thou long expected Jesus.