

BLESSED ARE THE NOT-SO-BLESSED

A Sermon for the Transfiguration, whoops, the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany. Year C, 2010

Text: Luke 6:17-26

I'm sorry. I wrote a sermon on the wrong text.

If this had not been the *last* Sunday before Lent it would have been labeled the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, and the Gospel reading would have been Luke 6:17-26. **If** the Colts had won the Super Bowl, I would preach today on the Gospel for Transfiguration Sunday.

But they didn't. We lost. And as a loser I saw an opportunity to wrestle with Luke's version of the Beatitudes of our Lord Jesus Christ. So I am going to take the liberty of preaching on a Gospel you have not heard today, but which is printed in the back of your bulletin.

I am probably going to be called for a late hit, but I need to talk with you a little bit about the Colts and the so-called Saints.

Now, I am *not* one who believes that "Manning" is another word for the Incarnation (God becoming a man). And I hesitate even to mention that in John 6:9, in the French Bible, it was the ancestor of one of our wide receivers who came up with five loaves and two fishes so Jesus could feed the five thousand: "*Il y a ici un jeune **garçon** qui a cinq pains d'orge et deux poissons.*"

But I noticed the morning after the game that sports writers were starting to reach for religious language to express themselves about the game. "Maybe the football gods, angry as most mortals over the Dec. 27 debacle, got their ultimate revenge on this Super Bowl Sunday," etc. And the Indianapolis Star was linking the defeat to a generally dejected mood in the city.

So I'm going to reach in the other direction and use our defeat in the Super Bowl to talk about what Jesus meant when he said "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, those who are hated, those who are made fun of, those who are excluded, those who are reviled and defamed on account of the Son of Man."

I would like to employ the Super Bowl as a model for thinking about the judgment of God. Kent Alder helpfully pointed out to me on Monday that "it's just a game," and "there's always next year," but I think there is something to be gained by mulling over what happened.

I think you will all agree that the Super Bowl was about judgment. Judgment between two parties: Who is better? One would win, one would lose. One team, one city, one quarterback would wear a crown, and rings, and get bragging rights,

great tee shirts, a parade, and feel proud and happy. The other quarterback would head for the locker room, and his city would walk around dejected, at least for a day.

But let's not talk about the win/lose judgment first. Let's talk about the other things we were calling good and bad. Because the game consisted of thousands of movements of people within a fixed grid, all focused on a football. There was a steady stream of things to measure, to like or dislike, approve or disapprove, and so on. You and I did it, and we were helped along by the commentators as well as the referees, who had to decide, for example, whether the two-point attempt was successful.

Did the ball cross the plane? Where was his knee? The judgment was rendered. Was someone out of bounds? Was there pass interference? Did they earn a first down? Did an offensive linesman twitch? How much time is on the clock? When Garçon dropped that pass, well, that was an easy call. He shouldn't have. When he made the catch in the end zone, that was an easy call, too. Addai had a great run. Freeney got a sack. All these things were visible, and we judged them good or bad.

You could have watched the game with the sound down, and made all these calls. And they mattered, because all those little right and wrong moves added up, and the score would add up, and at the end of the game, whoever had the most points would win. End of story.

But there was a second layer of judging going on. And that is a more colorful narrative. What amount of wisdom and desire did each team bring to the field? What happened *inside* the Colts when they stopped the so-called Saints on the one-yard line? And *then* how did they feel when they still came back and got a field goal just before the half? And didn't the on-side kick wreak some kind of havoc inside our team's hearts, at the beginning of the second half? Wasn't the game actually decided, the outcome formed, by what went on inside the players? You couldn't see any of that, you had to infer it, but wasn't that the real game? Inside their hearts and minds? For better or for worse! That is what ultimately added up to the final judgment.

But ultimately, there is a third sort of judgment, and that is the one that is most powerful. It is the single judgment that happened at the end of the game, when it was over. They won. We lost. There is no getting around that. No getting over it. All of the other judgments derived their significance from their relationship to that final one, the one that matters, the one that either gave us a reason to party,

or not. That's why Vince Lombardi would say "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing."

Talk all you want, you will not change the result of that Super Bowl.

Try to imagine Jesus in a sports bar in Indianapolis at the end of the Super Bowl. What would he say to the frustrated and dejected fans?

Would he say, "Wait till next year. We'll get them then. We'll cast down the mighty from their thrones"?

Would he say, "Football doesn't really matter. It's just a game. Don't be silly"?

Would he say, "Think about something else, something that makes you happy. Like, Indianapolis is the only capitol city that is situated in the exact center of its state!"?

Would he say, "Work it off in the gym. Better yet, do something nice for someone else and you'll feel better"?

I think Jesus would offer some great analysis of specific actions that were made by both teams, and he would give insight into what was making different players tick—or not—and then he would encourage us to look ahead to next year, and then he would say:

Do not make the mistake of thinking, ever, that anything bad that you do, or that happens to you, can rob you of your blessedness, the blessedness you have by virtue of belonging to me. That blessedness is impervious to any assault: poverty, hunger, loss, mourning, ridicule, death, you name it.

Right now, some people in New Orleans are making the mistake of extrapolating from their win to their blessedness. They are wrong. There are people in Milan, Indiana, who still think they're special because of 1954, but really. The kind of blessedness that people love to exult in when they win—it goes away. But love never ends. My love for you. God's love for you.

Even when you mess things up and lose a big game, blow a wonderful season, but even more when you mess up really important things—like your own lives and the lives of others—even then, my love for you does not stop, and that means you continue blessed.

Be wary of glory you can see. Super Bowl rings are great, get them whenever you can, but the ring that the Father put on his prodigal son's finger counts for a lot more.

Of course, football is just a game, and I'm kind of kidding. I don't think any of us really pins his or her true blessedness to the outcome of a ball game.

But Jesus, in his "beatitudes," does not only list serious things like poverty and the death of a loved one; he also lists smaller things like being made fun of. And what he says about lesser things holds true for **every single thing**, and we all have some powerful ones in our lives, every single thing that could take away our sense of blessedness. Some of them are our fault, because of our sin; sometimes we're just in the wrong place at the wrong time. All of them are of less importance than the verdict God renders on us for Jesus' sake: "Because your sins are forgiven, you are my beloved children, with whom I am jolly well pleased."

After Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration he performed a miracle. He cast the demon out of a young boy. The place Luke gives this story, and the way he tells us, is important. He concludes the story, "But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, **and gave him back to his father.**"

That is the glory of Jesus. That is why he lived, why he was transfigured, why he died and rose. In a nutshell, *to give us back to our Father*. Because it is in belonging to God, belonging to his kingdom, being *actual* saints, that we have true and ineradicable sainthood, which is not dependent upon or decided by anything about us, only by God's almighty love. Amen.