

I've only ever been, at most, a casual football fan, but I was well aware that for many people, football is like religion, even before David Gregory took me to my first Florida State game. It's funny, though. We think of football games as unpredictable; that's why you can bet on them. But from a certain point of view, virtually everything about them is completely predictable.

The rituals before and during the game, the starting time, duration, quarters and halftime, the rigid formation of offensive and defensive lines, the players' statistics are known in depth, and even the plays themselves follow patterns that broadcasters can describe succinctly. It's true, some details and the outcome of the game are unpredictable — unless you know which team's fans were more faithful in worship and pledging, and then you just expect that God made their victory inevitable.

We think we love sports for the excitement of their unpredictability, but really, I suspect that at least as much of their appeal lies in their familiarity, even their predictability. Then there's the intense sense of loyalty many fans feel toward their teams, and the sense of community they feel with each other. In a world that's changing ever faster, full of strange people and sometimes unpleasant surprises, our sports are comforting rituals and communities where change comes slowly. While the professional franchises are owned by a tiny wealthy elite, sports still make us feel that at least one part of life is safely under control.

I think that's why, for many people, religion is like football. We're susceptible not just to quoting scripture for our own purposes, but also to projecting our own preferences, perceptions, and priorities onto God with such intensity that we effectively remake God in our own image. Church is supposed to include everyone — that's why the creed describes it as "catholic" — but churches can become as tribal as fandoms. We become so determined to believe that God is whom we want God to be that we end up ignoring God as he truly is, or even rejecting God. Humanity has been doing this as long as we have known God.

The problem is not that God's revelations to humanity have been insufficient. When God became one of us in Jesus Christ, the most perfect and most accessible revelation of God that could ever be, we rejected God with the utmost force. Today's striking Gospel doesn't even encapsulate that rejection, but merely symbolically foreshadows it. Fortunately, this story also foreshadows our hope.

At least, I hope this story is a symbolic literary device, since it doesn't make much sense literally. For one thing, it's unclear whether the congregation is starting to turn on Jesus when they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" — the Greek is ambiguous — or whether Jesus provokes their anger.

He might well have provoked them because they were a little too pleased with him. Apparently they'd heard that Jesus had worked miracles in another town, so they might have figured, he "has to" do even better things for us, since we're his people, his hometown team. And of course Jesus had to disabuse them of the notion that they

controlled him, or that they were entitled to whatever they wanted from him, or that he was just for them.

So Jesus points out that God has a track record of performing miracles for “the other team,” the least deserving, the ultimate outsiders, saving not just gentiles like the widow, but a gentile like Naaman who had made war on Israel. It’s kind of like how people feel when a ref makes a call that benefits the other team. Except God’s calls don’t need video review; God gets it right every time. Which can be harder to accept.

Yes, God chose Israel to have a special knowledge and intimacy with God, and God blessed Israel abundantly, but God did this out of grace and love, not obligation. God does have a special love for Israel, but God also loves the rest of humanity. Jesus drives the point home by pointing out that Israel’s own sacred story shows that “being God’s chosen does not mean that God lets you benefit every time.”\*

Then the Gospel story gets weird. Not because the congregation doesn’t like what Jesus says, that part makes perfect sense. Rather, it’s how they take their anger out on him.

I’ve been to Nazareth. It’s a long, steep hike from the valley floor where people in ancient Nazareth lived up to the surrounding hilltops. If they’d wanted to kill Jesus, they could have saved the exertion and attacked him right there. Instead, they “drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill.” And by the way, how did they go from driving him out... to leading him up? Did he want to go?

As I mentioned in our Bible Study this past Thursday, you can often respond to questions about Bible stories by saying, “That’s not the point of the story!” But that works best if you know what the point of the story is. While I have no doubt that this story is based on actual history of Jesus being rejected in his hometown, from the way Luke tells it, the point of this story seems to be to foreshadow the crucifixion, to which Jesus did go willingly. So I think St. Luke let theology overshadow history this time, in order to make a powerful point.

But that’s not the end of the story. It gets weirder! Just when we’d expect either the crowd to succeed in throwing Jesus off the cliff, or Jesus to turn the tables on them, not necessarily with a miraculous show of strength — that would have been playing into their hands, ironically upholding their expectations — but maybe he could have said something to change their minds, turn their hearts, something along the lines of “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.” You know, something appropriately punchy and memorable. Or maybe Jesus would vanish, like on the road to Emmaus, or the crowd would be overwhelmed by a burst of heavenly light, like at the Transfiguration. We expect nothing less. But we get “the most anticlimactic of anticlimaxes ever.”\*

Maybe Luke is challenging his audience here, defying *our* expectations in order to drive home his criticism of expectations. One optimistic commentator I read supposes “they let him go because they think he might just be the messiah.”\*\* Well OK, maybe? *Let’s take another look at that play.* Luke doesn’t say that Jesus said or did anything

between when he reached the brow of the hill and when he slipped away. So why would the crowd have changed their minds then?

I think the answer lies in Luke's symbolism, so let's look again from a different angle. From which we might conclude that there is indeed a miracle at the heart of this story. Because even though on a literal level, the only reason the crowd had for bringing Jesus up there was their hostility, on a symbolic level, they wound up putting Jesus in the only appropriate place in town. Because the hilltop doesn't just symbolize the crucifixion, the hill of Golgotha, it also symbolizes Mount Sinai, the Temple Mount, and the uplifted hearts of all faithful people: the hilltop symbolizes all the rightful dwelling-places of God, and Jesus indeed is there. Despite human hostility, Jesus is pleased to dwell among us — as one of us, no less.

Though the crowd was acting out of their rejection of Jesus, his very being was so powerful; his love, so immense and definitive, that inexorably they wound up drawn into a form of worshipful relationship, however imperfect. So the story ends the only way it could, with Jesus continuing on his mission and the people left to choose whether to follow him or not.

While Jesus wasn't one to shy away from a vigorous journey, I'm sure he would have preferred it if his hometown crowd had simply listened to his message, followed his teachings, and rededicated themselves to their wild, untamable God. But our Lord is always willing to meet us where we are, so profound is his love for us. Our sinfulness is no match for God's grace.

Even when we try to make religion like football, God is still mystically at work in our souls. God can beat us at our own game, for God knows our whole playbook and uses even our intransigence to advance God's plan. So while our preference for our own reflection — our inclination to domesticate and demystify God — is a real problem, and one we ought always to guard against and push back on, ultimately God will break through our defenses, for God always has possession of our hearts. God might allow our stubborn sinfulness to slow down God's offensive drive, but in the end we know God will win this and every game. God will lead us into a greater mission than we could have designed, with a greater understanding of who our teammates are, until we reach end zone of heaven, where there is no penalty for excessive celebration.

\*<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/01/a-rough-and-tumble-reception.html>

\*\*<http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/cpr04m.shtml>