

Sport and Scandal
(Genesis 21:1-10; Micah 6:6-12)

Rev. Joanne Sanders will often get the attention of her colleagues by lovingly addressing us as “Sportsfans.” Yet she knows that, where I am concerned, her use of this term of endearment is generous, at best. One famous autumn night, we were sharing a room at a conference. Asking if I minded watching the World Series she turned on the television, and instructed me, “We have to root for Boston.” “Sure, I replied, glancing at the scoring box, which said BOS and STL. Who cares about the Steelers anyway?”

But for someone who doesn’t know baseball from football, for someone who has only entered a stadium for academic events, sports has infused even the most unforgettable moments of my life. On the morning of January 25, 1987, I was sprawled out in the back of our Chevrolet Celebrity wagon, with my husband trying valiantly to keep me calm as our doctor sped to the nearest emergency room. Within minutes, our daughter was born. And then, I waited, and waited and waited. It took four hours in recovery before a room could be readied. There was no medical reason; the hospital was short-staffed. It turns that the Sunday morning when I became a mother was Superbowl Sunday. When a room was finally available, my new roommate who had given birth the same morning barely acknowledged me before returning her attention to the television set. She was engrossed in watching the game.

So I know that for many, sports rank right up there with childbirth as a peak experience. Indeed, for a large swath of this country, football is holy. Jon Stewart made this point with his inimitable humor at the height of the Penn State scandal. He showed clips of outraged students rioting over the firing of their beloved head coach in the wake of allegations of child sexual abuse taking place on his watch. “I get that it’s probably hard for you to believe that this guy you think is infallible and this program you think is sacred could hide such heinous activities.... But no one’s trying to take away your religion, in this case football; they’re just trying to bring some accountability to a pope and some of his cardinals. On Saturday you’ll still get to go to services against Nebraska,” he said. And in a less ironic reflection, the New York Times reported two weeks ago the results of a Twitter survey of how people spend their Sunday. “Sunday is a day to acknowledge a higher power, but for many that meant the guys in

shoulder pads and hair extensions. Football drew nearly 9000 mentions on Twitter, compared with about 6000 for church and 500 for God.”

So if sport has become our de facto religion, what values are being instilled from the pulpit, (that is, the field), or in the pews, (that is, the stands)? What is being taught in the locker-room seminaries and how do those teachings carry over when the game or the services conclude?

We know what words thunder down from the sports pulpit: Sports build character, promote teamwork and instill a strong work ethic. And for many people, they do, including Andrew Luck and his fans, disappointed that one of our own, a scholar-athlete embodying the best in competition and character did not win the Heisman. To be sure, there are players and teams valuing sportsmanship, without the dark side of scandal, violence, depravity and collusion that is so much in evidence recently. But every religion is also a culture, a commentary that is unwritten yet understood. In the commentary of sport, skilled players elicit deference, paradoxically, not for being “sportsmanlike” but for being special. So much—a college’s or community’s self esteem, riches and reputation—rides on their achievement. Yet behavior that distinguishes an athlete on the field may not be admirable outside the stadium. A former coach who studies ethics in competition identifies some of the reasons why privileged athletes are often not the acolytes we wish for. Sharon Stoll says that elite players view their opponents as obstacles to overcome rather than as honorable individuals. These athletes often develop a sense of entitlement, coupled with discouragement to think for themselves. They rarely face consequences for acting irresponsibly. Even if they know right from wrong, they often believe—with plenty of evidence—that they can get away with anything. Stoll found that those at the pinnacle of the religion of sport—athletes in team contact sports such as football—fare poorly in tests of moral reasoning. She explains, “When you are allowed to hit someone within the rules, you start to view your opponents as an object and not human.” There are ample opportunities to break the rules, as the line from acceptable contact to violations can sometimes blur.

Such a blurring of lines—treating people as objects, threatening violence, even sexual abuse is hinted at in today’s Genesis text. Sarah and Abraham’s son Isaac is a young boy, newly weaned “*Vaterei Sarah et ben Hagar hamitzrit asher yalda l’Abraham mitzachek.*” “And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, *mitzachek*. Some translate *mitzachek* as playing. Some translate it as mocking. Some see the connection between Isaac’s name—Yitzchak, meaning laughter and the word, *mitzachek*, to suggest

the two boys laughing together. Perhaps his half-brother Ishmael and Isaac are engaged in harmless play. But perhaps there is a darker meaning. If a young boy is harmlessly playing with his half-brother, Ishmael, why does it elicit such an abrupt and radical reaction from Sarah? “Cast out that slave-woman and her son!” His mother’s harsh outburst leads several commentators to notice that words with the same three letter root as *metzachek* occur in two other stories that entail sexual violence—one, when Joseph is thrown into jail after being falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife of sexual advances, and another, when Lot is threatened by a mob bent on homosexual violence.

A contemporary commentator puts it this way: “...our ignorance of what type of *play* Ishmael wanted does not diminish our objective surety that he had foul play in mind...The Concordance [a listing of words and contexts] discloses that the word *play* in the intensive tense in the Bible always connotes a playful teasing of a sexual or foul nature. [Furthermore] Sarah does not call [the youth] by his name, Ishmael, but by his genealogy (“son of a . . .”).” In doing so, she evokes genealogical and racial epithets to hint at deviant sexual behavior.”

Ambiguous or obvious, this physical encounter in the biblical text suggests some of the qualities noted by Sharon Stoll when she examines the religion of sport—dehumanization, the blurring of lines between acceptable and unacceptable contact, the shadow of violence. We are so confused about this. Not only in an interpretation of the biblical text. Think of the words we use. Athletes play. We say, “He’s quite a player.” Or, “He’s *quite a player.*” It could mean that he is a skilled athlete or that he is a stud using others sexually for sport. Or consider another confusing word—horseplay. Indeed, Jerry Sandusky, the former Penn State coach accused of child sexual abuse and arrested this week, described in his own words his contact with young boys as “horsing around.” “Horsing around” like the biblical, *mitzabek*, conjures up that potentially imaginary line between playful and harmful. Do you remember the scene in Brokeback Mountain, where horseplay both masks and makes possible a sexual encounter?

In real life, some people might be limited by their fears or sense of powerlessness, or they might read a scene as ambiguous. But in the biblical story, the ambiguity leads to clarity. There is a coach of sorts to stop the play. Sarah sees danger. She insists on the protection of a young boy. At Penn State, there was at least one occasion where an older person allegedly saw danger. Caught in the confusing tenets of his religion of sport, while he revealed what he knew, he did not protect a young boy. And the head coach, the high priest of football in Penn State, heard, but did not hear, saw but did not see. His staff

and his players were real to him. They were his seminarians. The endangered children were distant, other, out of focus.

In my religion, in your religion, in the religion of football, adults matter. Leaders matter. Coaches matter. Values matter. What will those adults teach? What qualities will the leaders embody? Which values will be inculcated? Will it be that the program takes precedence over the powerless? That winning trumps wisdom? Will it be that if you refuse to name injustice and betrayal, it doesn't exist? Will it be that the first response to danger within is to circle the wagons to protect from danger from without? Or will our religion teach that caring for children is a sacred trust, that fair play is not a platitude, that how you play the game of sport reflects how to live honestly, compassionately and communally in the game of life?

Professor Sharon Stoll, the coach turned sports ethicist did not become a character educator as a scold. She learned from a very bracing personal failure. Not a failure in competition, but a failure in compassion. In the early 1970s, she was a gymnastics coach. One of her gymnasts had just completed a routine when she noticed that the next contender, an opponent from another school who was much shorter than she, had not moved the springboard to adjust for her height—creating the potential for a dangerous accident. “Coach,” Ms. Stoll’s student asked her, “shouldn’t we tell her to adjust the springboard?” “Get ready for your next routine.” Ms. Stoll ordered.

A moment later, the misplaced springboard caused the opposing team’s gymnast to slam into a vault, knocking the wind out of her.

For Ms. Stoll, this was a wake up call. She started to study the philosophy of sport and now develops curricula to help coaches and players improve their moral reasoning. She asks them, “What is character? Who are you? What are the influences in your life? How can you make good decisions?” She leads discussions about justice and fair play and helps coaches to consider what behaviors are consistent with the values they claim to live by. “Players are always looking to coaches to see how strongly they feel about the rules. You affect these kids with everything you do,” she tells them.

Coaches are the high priests of the religion of sport. They have a responsibility to teach the texts and traditions of playing well, playing fair, and playing as a team. Thomas Day is a 31 year old Catholic Iraq war veteran. He is also a Penn State graduate, a native of State College, and he is a product of the Second Mile Foundation, the non-profit run by Sandusky, where he both helped, and

harmed children. The failure of the people and institutions he trusted hit him hard. Listen to his words.

“I was never harmed by Sandusky, but I could have been. When I was 15, my mother, then looking for a little direction for her teenage son, introduced me to the Second Mile’s Friend Fitness program. It was a program resembling Big Brother, Big Sister, with a weekly exercise regimen. Instead of Sandusky’s care, I was sent to a group of adults, many of whom were in the 20s. They took me from a C-student to the University of Chicago, where I’m a master’s student now. They took the football team’s waterboy and made a 101st Airborne Division soldier.

I was one of the lucky ones. My experience with Second Mile was a good one. I should feel fortunate, blessed even, that I was never harmed. Yet instead this week has left me deeply shaken, wondering what will come of the foundation, the university and the community that made me into a man.”

What indeed? The religion of sport will not diminish. But it can borrow from other religious traditions and inculcate within its sacred precincts self reflection, repentance and renewal. Coaches, competition, sport can turn an aimless teen into a civic hero. It can create an understanding of the power and possibility of teamwork that can repair the world. It can guide young people to live by the character attributes heralded by the prophet, Micah, “to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Like all religions, the religion of sport has the power to harm and to heal, to encourage distinction or to engender despair.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson once so presciently wrote: “The Gods we worship write their names on our faces; be sure of that. And a man will worship something ... That which dominates will determine his life and character. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

What Gods will we worship in the world of sport? We owe it to Thomas Day and others like him, to the nameless victims of sexual, emotional and physical abuse of coaches and other adults oblivious to their influence to examine our gods and to challenge our religion. We owe it to the colleges and communities that ache for something to rally around that it be worthy of their sacred trust. Let us renew what can be made sacred and root out what can scar. Not only our children, our colleges and our communities, but our very future is at stake.

Works referred to:

The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, November 10, 2011

John Leland, "Eating, Sleeping, Praying and Writing All About it," New York Times, November 27, 2011

Brad Wolverton, "Morality Play", The Chronicle of Higher Education, August 4, 2006

Russell Hendel, Peshat and Derash: A New Intuitive and Analytic Approach
<http://www.rashiyomi.com/rashi.pdf>

Thomas Day, "Penn State, my final loss of faith," The Washington Post, November 11, 2011