

*The Super Bowl of Faith*

There was a joke making the rounds on the Internet a while back. Indianapolis Colts' quarterback Peyton Manning dies and goes to heaven. St. Peter lets him through the Pearly Gates and offers to walk Peyton to his new home. As they are walking along they pass a huge mansion all done up in black and gold with huge Pittsburgh Steelers banners all around it. Eventually they come to Peyton Manning's new dwelling, a ramshackle little trailer with a single tattered Colts' pennant in the window. So Peyton Manning says to St. Peter, "I don't mean to complain, but why does Ben Roethlisberger get a huge mansion, and all I get is a broken down little trailer?" "Oh," says St. Peter, "that's not Ben Roethlisberger's house – that's God's house!"

Speaking of the Steelers', have you seen the video "We All Bleed Black and Gold" by the Basement Brothers? KDKA was showing it frequently around the time of the Super Bowl and now it's on Youtube. The lead singer is my chiropractor, Dr. Robb Fishman. He was featured on the cover of the Monroeville Times Express the other week. When I was being treated in his office a week or so ago, Dr. Fishman asked me if I had talked about the Steelers in any of my sermons recently. When I said I hadn't, he launched into an inspiring speech about what a great example the Steelers were of perseverance and faith in the face of adversity. In fact, he offered to come in and preach for me – which would really have been something because I believe he's Jewish! In lieu of Dr. Fishman preaching, I considered building a sermon based on sports metaphors some Sunday.

I debated with myself whether or not it is appropriate to use sports imagery to talk about our faith. I wouldn't want to trivialize the mysteries of God. There is a danger in treating the things of God in a too familiar way, as if God was just "one of the boys," not our Lord and Savior. However, no less an authority than St. Paul used sports metaphors to describe the Christian life. In our second lesson today Paul uses images drawn from track and field and boxing, sports that would have been popular in his time. So I guess it's alright to compare faith and sports, even the most popular sport in our place and time: Steelers' football.

The Steelers' started off well in 2007 but then faded at the end of the season, getting bounced out of the playoffs after just one game. In training camp this summer there were some reasons to be hopeful, but also many question marks. Rashard Mendenhall and Limas Sweed looked like solid draft picks, and Mewelde Moore looked like a decent addition. Head Coach Mike Tomlin had established himself as a winner in his first season and looked to be a competent and confident leader. But then Tracy Hampton went on the physically unable to perform list because he was out of shape and Troy Polamalu was nursing a bum knee. The punter, Daniel Sepulveda, tore his ACL, and second string quarterback Charlie Batch broke his collarbone. All that did not bode well for the Steelers.

It was well publicized that the Steelers' had the toughest schedule in the NFL in 2008, in fact, it was one of the toughest schedules ever in pro football history. And so many Monday night and Thursday games didn't figure to help any with their practice routine. Through the season there was

tragedy and turmoil. Remember when the Ravens' Ray Lewis broke Rashard Mendenhall's arm early in the season? Remember when our long snapper got injured and James Harrison, who would become the NFL Defensive player of the year, filled in for him and snapped the ball over the head of Mitch Berger, our replacement punter, for a safety? And worst of all, do you remember Ben Roethlisburger being carried from the field on a stretcher, his head immobilized, in the last game of the regular season?

Having just won Super Bowl XL following the 2005 season, could Steelers fans really hope for another Super Bowl appearance so soon, to say nothing of another World Championship? Almost miraculously, Ben Roethlisberger recovered and led to the Steelers to two playoff victories at Heinz Field and another Super Bowl berth. Ominously though, Super Bowl XL Most Valuable Player Hines Ward was injured in the AFC Championship game against our archrivals, the Baltimore Ravens.

Probably 99% of you here this morning watched Super Bowl XLIII so I won't give you a play-by-play description. I'll just highlight a few plays. On the Steelers' first possession, Ben Roethlisberger and Hines Ward connected on a big gainer that helped set up the Steelers' first score, a field goal by the ever consistent kicker Jeff Reed. Then as time expired at the end of first half, as the Cardinals were threatening to take the lead, linebacker James Harrison picked off a Kurt Warner pass and returned it 100 yards for a touchdown, the longest play in Super Bowl history and probably the first time Harrison has ran 100 yards in a long, long time. Then finally, with only 30 seconds remaining in the game, and the Steelers trailing by three, Santonio Holmes caught a perfectly thrown Ben Roethlisburger pass in the

corner of the end zone to score the winning touchdown. It was a game for the ages.

So what does this have to do with Christian faith? In our text from 1 Corinthians, St. Paul talks about the rigorous training an athlete must endure to be a champion. He talks about punishing his body and enslaving it. We remember how hard Tracy Hampton worked to get down to his playing weight. We recall how Hines Ward took treatments on his sprained knee virtually around the clock to be able to play in the Super Bowl. Do we Christians work that hard practicing our faith? Do we exercise our faith like that? Sadly, a lot of Christians act as if just because they are baptized they never have to do anything else. Sadly, some Christians act as if just because they once professed Jesus as their Savior they never have to think about God again. What kind of athlete would train for one day and expect it last him all season? Not a very good one!

The Christian faith is something we have to keep working at. An inactive Christian is a contradiction in terms. To be a Christian is to be practicing our faith. We have to live out our faith everyday or it will erode. If we don't use it, we'll lose it. Practicing our faith will naturally include some kind of engagement with scripture, perhaps daily scripture reading and devotions. It will also involve prayer. We need to set aside some specific time for prayer each day, but we can also raise our hearts and minds to God at any time of day. He is there whenever we need Him, or whenever we just want to talk to Him. Worship is another way to keep our faith strong. Working out with other Christians keeps our spiritual muscles toned.

I also hear St. Paul urging perseverance and commitment. We Christians have a goal in front of us, to witness to Christ to the entire world. Our goal is to love and serve others Christ has loved and served us. But many things distract us from that goal. Many things would prevent us from reaching that goal. We get hurt and we say “Why me?” and then we flounder in doubt. Or we get criticized and we say “Poor me,” and wallow in self pity. There are lots of reasons why the Christian church and Christian people can’t do what they want to do: we don’t have the money, we don’t have the time, we don’t have the people, etc., etc. Well, those excuses don’t cut it.

When James Harrison was lumbering 100 yards down that field he shook off or ran over several would-be tacklers, and you know he was winded and tired, but he kept on going. He kept on going because it was important. Nothing was going to keep him out of the end zone. Our Christian mission is even more important than that touchdown. Dare we fail? Dare we quit? Dare we give it anything less than our best effort?

I must confess, when the Steelers were down 23-20 in the final two minutes, I lost faith in them. I thought the game was over. But obviously Ben Roethlisberger, Santonio Holmes and the rest of the offense hadn’t lost faith in themselves, and they pulled out the victory on an incredible play. Ultimately our faith, our confidence is not in any human being. Our faith for salvation is in Christ alone. He alone can save us from a meaningless life and eternal death. Jesus’ death and resurrection won our salvation and that is the greatest victory of all time. The sport stars of today will fade and the drama of athletic will one day be forgotten, but Jesus will remain true to us forever, and we can rest securely in His triumph. Amen.