

## September 12th, 2021

### “Hold the Rope”

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Eph. 3:20-21; Ps. 37:4; Heb. 11:1, 6; Col. 3:23-24, Jn 17:20-21

Sept. 12, 2021

FIRST SUNDAY AT MORGANFIELD

***“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father,***

***just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that***

***the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:20-21)***

In a previous church that I served in Covington I would sometimes catch a little grief for the number of SPORTS ANALOGIES that I would use in my messages. And while there is no doubt that I do derive great pleasure from following the athletic endeavors of a certain School in BR... particularly as they struggled last night against another one from Lake Charles... like ANYTHING, it CAN be overdone. And I BELIEVE that I have done better at not overdoing references to sports. Though some of you in this room will have to be the judge of that...

This being said, today’s message will certainly ‘feed’ in that ‘old habit.’ Several months ago I had the pleasure and privilege of being invited to a ‘premier party’ for a documentary on the SEC Network that was to be released the next day. The subject of this short film was none other than the legendary LSU baseball coach Skip Bertman. In winning 5 national championships in a 10-year span in the ‘90’s, Coach B elevated himself into comparisons with ‘dynasty architects’ like John Wooden at UCLA and Bear Bryant at Alabama. (Well, I guess you’d also have to say Bear’s successor, Nick Saban, with

whom Skip coached at LSU for one year. It's just that I kind of 'choke' on mentioning that name...)

That documentary was entitled *"Hold the Rope."* Early on in his career at LSU Coach Bertman apparently asked each individual player before the season that if he were hanging off of a cliff at the end of a rope, which player on the team would he want 'holding the rope.' Each one would consider which of their teammates were the strongest, or the most tenacious, or the most dedicated. Supposedly one player finally gave the correct answer: 'It wouldn't be up to one single player, Coach; they would ALL be there to 'Hold the Rope.' That mantra... **'Hold the rope'**... would be one that would help carry LSU baseball to unprecedented success both on and off the field. With a little help from a pretty darn good coach. And one entertaining guy, as well...

Hearing this story that night... ALWAYS looking for good 'sermon illustrations'... I was inspired that this could be a central theme for my first message at our [the] new church home [of the LC church] here on Corbina Road. That as we [they] seek to fulfill our 'team goal' to **"Know Christ and Make Christ Known"** in this 'Mission field' known as 'MorganField,' a very important character trait that we must display is that of TEAMWORK. [And in truth, a quality trait that is also quite alive and well HERE in Welsh!] (Please note that parenthetical statements in '[...]' are for the Welsh church's benefit). That we are a people who are THERE for each other. Through 'thick and thin.' Both for those long-time friends that we have known 'forever,' and those new friends that we are looking forward to getting to know right here in our midst... our 'next-door neighbors.' At a time when so many people are quite literally 'at the END of their rope,' we need to be known as those who will come together to **"Hold the Rope."** WITH each other, and FOR others...

As I listened intently to the rest of the program, from interviews with players, other coaches, and with 'the man' himself, Coach Bertman, I found other 'juicy morsels' of inspiration that would also 'PREACH.' Aside from this overarching theme of the importance of the WHOLE 'team'... i.e. the entire 'body of Christ'... whom Paul reminds us that though we are many, we are yet ONE... just as Jesus in today's passage prays that His followers **"may all be one"**... I also really resonated with Skip's team philosophy on **optimum achievement** on the field. He called it *"How to Win Awareness."* Guiding

principles that the players bought into and could still recite years later! The premise is this: **“If you... 1) Vividly Imagine 2) Ardently Desire 3) Sincerely Believe and 4) Enthusiastically Act ... it must certainly come to pass.”**

As we look forward to this new chapter in the [L.C.] church’s history, I will also be using the referenced Scriptures to illustrate the 4 points of this team philosophy. [One that can also apply to THIS church as it faces the future]. How his team strategy for victory in baseball might also relate to our own personal strategy for ‘victory’ in LIFE... as we follow not merely a human coach, but the very Son of God, Jesus Christ...

The first one is to **Vividly Imagine**. Now, whenever I head that word ‘imagine,’ particularly with regards to God’s Word, my mind goes to ***Eph. 3:20-21***. Paul speaks of a God who is ***“able to do immeasurably more than we could (EVER) ask or imagine.”*** Now, I don’t know about you, but I can have pretty ‘VIVID’ imagination! And Paul is saying here that God can do ‘IMMEASUREABLY’ More than our ‘vivid’ imaginations can conjure up.

Think about some synonyms for that word ‘vivid’: ‘Colorful.’ ‘Strong.’ ‘Vigorous.’ ‘Lively.’ ‘Intense.’ Words that could certainly be used to describe college athletes. [repeat] And if we can use such adjectives for athletic pursuits, how much MORE should we use our ‘vivid imaginations’ for our ‘*spiritual* pursuits?’ ‘Team goals’ last for a season. ‘Faith goals’ last for a lifetime. Or two... earthly, and eternal...

As many of you know, this [L.C.] congregation has a long history of faith development and service dating back to 1888. [As does the Welsh church have over 100 years of ministry ‘under its belt.’] In its latter years, however, it struggled through gradual decline in membership. Decline that would have led to its eventual closure. A trend that was certainly disheartening to those who had given so much in service to the church of Jesus Christ. But rather than ‘play out the string,’ if you will... rather than live out its final days under ‘hospice care’... there was that faithful ‘remnant’ (like that band of faithful Jewish followers led by Moses) that hung on to that promise of God that He had a plan for 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian: ***“plans to prosper, not to harm... plans to give HOPE and a FUTURE.”*** (Jeremiah 29:11) And

because of, in Paul's words, ***“the power at work within them,”*** WE have been able to ***“accomplish abundantly/immeasurably more than all we could ask or (VIVIDLY!) imagine!”***

And that by the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit, here in this humble RE-birth at 4590 Corbina Road, we [the L.C. Church] will continue to be a living, growing witness to God... where ***“to him (WILL) glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus, to all generations, forever and ever.”*** [And I support that same result for this church in Welsh.] AMEN?!

The second aspect of Bertman's 'Winning Awareness' was ***'Ardently Desire.'*** Referring back to those visionaries of the church who 'vividly imagined' a 'future hope' in another part of the city, I know that they ALL had a certain level of 'desire' to realize that promised hope. But the key word in this phrase, for me, is ***'ardently.'*** That term 'ardent' is defined as being ***“characterized by warmth of feeling typically expressed in eager zealous support or activity.”*** Synonyms for 'ardent' include words like “fiery... shining... glowing.” That term is often associated with nouns like 'fans'... 'admirers'... and 'supporters.' But how about 'Christians'...? 'Presbyterians'? Too often, we hear an expression more like the opposite... the 'frozen chosen'...

Now, does that mean that as a church, or as an individual, if we simply 'eagerly, zealously desire' for God to give us 'success,' to 'prosper' us, that, in the closing phrase of the coach's words, ***“it must certainly come to pass”?*** I don't think so. That's why to pick up on this notion of 'desires,' I was drawn to the words of David in Psalm 37:4... ***“Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”***

I don't know about you, but I can 'take delight' in an awful lot of things besides the Lord. Football. A good cold beer. A Darrell's Special. Key lime pie. And much more important things like my wife, my children, and grandchildren. These are all quite 'delightful' to me. But how does my everyday, walking-around life reflect my 'taking delight in the Lord?' How do the daily decisions in life... like when that person on the cellphone cuts me off in traffic... or deciding how to spend 'all that money' I get paid for these now 'TWO hours a week' I work... how do they demonstrate that I ***“take delight in***

**the Lord”?** As you and I ‘ardently desire’ to serve our Lord, we should always remember the wording of the Lord’s Prayer: “...*THY will be done.*” It doesn’t say ‘MY will be done’...

The third ‘spoke’ of this ‘wheel of (good) fortune’ is one that we can certainly appreciate as Christians: we must **Sincerely believe**. The passage from Hebrews says that “***without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him.***” The NIV translation adds an adjective: “***earnestly seek him.***” As in “sincerely.” For WHY would our minds ‘vividly imagine’... why would our hearts ‘ardently desire’... unless we first ‘sincerely believe.’ Our culture most often lives by the philosophy of ‘I’ll believe it when I see it.’ You know... the gospel according to ‘Doubting’ Thomas. And yet, Jesus said that blessed are those who have NOT seen, and yet believe. That by believing, we WILL see the ultimate victory in Jesus

Ryan Theriot played second base and shortstop for the LSU Tigers from 1998-2000, and is probably best known for scoring the winning run to win the Tigers’ last championship under Bertman in 2000. While he may not have been the guy to belong to Fellowship of Christian Athletes and lead team prayers, he did make a statement about playing for Bertman that we might resonate with: “*The belief system is very important.*” That by believing, one would see the ultimate victory. In baseball. And in Christ...

And finally, as a member of ‘Team Jesus’ (borrowing from my brother Paul Pettefer), we must **Enthusiastically Act**. All of this ‘imagining,’ ‘desiring,’ and ‘believing’ is of little value if we do not put that faith into ACTION. As we were reminded by Jesus’ brother James last week, “***Faith without works is dead faith.***” But the word I like here is ‘**enthusiastically.**’ Like I’ve said, there is nothing any more damaging to the Christian witness than a GRUMPY CHRISTIAN! (You know who you are... ) That we do not serve simply, as Paul tells the Corinthians, out of ‘compulsion,’ or ‘reluctantly,’ but that “***God loves a cheerful giver.***” (2 Corinthians 9:7) **AS DO OTHERS.**

In our Colossians passage Paul wrote “***Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord.***” The NIV says to “***work at it with***

***all your heart.***” Whatever our task may be, no matter how big or small, we must look at it as being done for God, and therefore put ourselves wholeheartedly, joyfully, enthusiastically into it. It ALL matters...

DD Breaux, the ‘ageless wonder’ who coached over 40 YEARS as the LSU women’s gymnastics coach, related how much Coach B had meant to her in her development both as a coach and a person. She said that she would never forget him calling her into his office and telling her that there was no part of her job that was too small to not do well. From opening gym doors for practice to washing uniforms to coaching during a national championship meet, he would tell her: **“Everything Matters.”** (which is actually the title of his recent book). And in her long and illustrious career, she bore witness to that truth...

May we as well. That from the time we wake up in the morning, to the time we lay our heads down at night, “Everything matters.” That ‘whatever the task,’ we should ‘work at it with all our heart.’ With energy and enthusiasm. For our labors are not just for our own satisfaction, or an employer’s, or a family member’s... ***“we serve the Lord Christ.”***

And so, my sisters and brothers, as we gather together in this brand new [historic] worship space... with a timeless faith that has brought us safe thus far... let us consider what unites us. A faith that calls us to **vividly imagine... ardently desire... sincerely believe... and enthusiastically act.** Much more than any human baseball coach... or worship leader or ‘long-winded’ pastor... you and I have a Savior who PRAYS for us. A Lord who prays for all those who will come to believe through us. A friend named Jesus who ‘ardently desires’ that we be one... as he and the Father are one. And we know that we WILL NOT FALL... as long as we... **Hold the rope...**

#### OTHER TEAMWORK SCRIPTURES:

And let us consider how to provoke [**spur**] **one another** to love and good deeds,

<sup>25</sup> **not neglecting to meet together**, as is the habit of some, but **encouraging** one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb. 10:24-25)

<sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are **many members**, yet **one body**. (1 Cor. 12:18-20) “One team, One heartbeat”

**Iron sharpens iron**, and one person sharpens the wits of another. (Prov. 27:17)

**Two are better than one**, because they have a **good reward for their toil**. <sup>10</sup> For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. (Eccles. 4:9-10)

**Charge and Benediction**: I am sure that many of you watched various parts of the coverage of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. An event that was aptly described by one family member of a lost loved one: ‘A day that we don’t want to forget... and really don’t want to remember either.’ Aside from the very positive move to ‘reclaim the day’ by designating September 11<sup>th</sup> as a national day of SERVICE, let us also focus on what happened on September **12<sup>th</sup>**... and beyond. That a nation that had been quite divided politically, and socially... a nation marked by great division and fear... **CAME TOGETHER**. People of different backgrounds, ethnicities, religions, and political parties, put aside their differences to **BE THERE** for others. As, believe it or not, a *commercial* aptly put it, what should come out of our remembering the events of 9/11 is that we must **‘never forget what we are capable of when we come together.’** As the brother of one of the

heroes on Flight 93 that crashed into a field outside of Shanksville PA said, we should recall that Latin phrase on which our nation was founded: '*E Pluribus Unum.*' "Out of many, ONE." May THIS day after 9/11 also be one of coming together for the greater good... as we work to serve a 'good, good Father.'

As you and I in the church seek to foster that same unity... as together we strive to "hold the rope"... let us never forget that we do not do so alone. But that the Spirit of the living God is above you to watch over you, behind you to support you, beside you to be your friend, goes before you to show you the way... and dwells deep inside of you to give you peace. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all of God's precious 'rope holders' said, 'AMEN!' Go in peace...