

The First Baptist Church, Midland  
January 31, 2010  
Mark 12: 28-34

### ***Moving the Chains***

A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

Theme: Football As a Metaphor for Life and Faith

Football... the great American sport. I think it's a wonderful metaphor for life and faith. I know... this game may not be your cup of Gatorade, but you have to admit the timing is perfect to consider the possibilities. Look at it like this... there's something "Saintly" about such consideration this year and I've felt the "Brees" of the spirit encouraging me to move in this direction. Besides, what are you going to be doing next Sunday if you're not watching the big game? You'll probably be "Payton" your living room or "Manning" your kitchen to prepare dinner. Let's face it... the Superbowl is a lot more fun than that. Okay... enough. Did I miss any corny puns? On to the serious stuff.

I never played the game of football competitively. How about you? I tried out when I was a freshman in high school but they didn't need a 5'2" 120 pound weakling. Oh wait, there was that year when our intramural flag football team won the championship on the Eastern Baptist campus. We were awesome! I played split end – that's wide receiver today - and can remember sticking the flags in my pockets when no one was looking. It really didn't matter a whole lot because they rarely threw the football in my direction so no one really noticed. I have to admit, though, that the game we played then doesn't resemble the modern game.

Can you imagine getting hit by one of today's linemen? I'm telling you... if some 300 pound muscle bound guy is heading in my direction, I'm laying down. And if he wants the ball, he can have it... no questions asked.

Another thing that's different today... the rules. They've got a rule for just about anything you can imagine. And the object is to, of course, play by the rules. Bill Cowher, the former head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers who has turned into an analyst said it well... *We don't want to circumcise the rules...* I don't think that came out exactly the way he meant it but you get the point.

Oh, and how about the technology that has made its way into the game. The quarterbacks now have receivers in their helmets as well as on the ends of the offensive line. You have those little overhead cameras that run up and down the length of the field to get every angle you can imagine. And don't you love the computer generated lines on your TV to show where the ball needs to be for the first down. It's incredible.

And what about the commercials? Many of them are as good as the game itself. Did you see the cost for a 30 second ad in this year's Super Bowl? They're going for 3.2 million. Personally, my favorite is the little toddler sitting in his high chair waxing eloquent about some grand scheme. I loved it last year when he called his aging golf partner "shankapotamus". I'll

tell you the truth... I don't remember the company he was representing, but I sure do like that little guy. I hope he's back again.

No doubt about it... the Superbowl is definitely a slice of Americana. And there really are some good lessons to be drawn from the competition. So let's consider a few.

You'll notice we have borrowed a set of first down markers for today's service. (Thank you Brendon Smith) Dare I say there are probably more people in our country who know what these markers are for than who know what the cross is for? I bet I'm right and that's sad. Anyway, these down markers are used to help us gauge progress in moving toward the goal. And we're going to use them for that purpose this morning. So I need a couple volunteers. By the way, if you think this is a cool thing to do, tell Paula. It was her idea. If you think it's kind of dumb... tell me. I don't want to hurt her feelings.

Okay, now here's what we're going to try to do... we're going to make our way to the goal line and we'll measure our progress along the way. And just what is that goal? Since we're focusing upon the gospel of Mark this morning, we're going to consider his perspective and that is pretty clearly defined in the first chapter.

As you know, this gospel introduces us to Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan River by his cousin John... the guy with locusts stuck in his teeth and wild honey on his breath. Coming out of the water, Jesus is led by the spirit into the wilderness for forty days. And when he finally emerges the vision or the goal is clearly articulated by the Messiah... **"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."** (Mark 1:15) There is no question that for Mark, the goal in the coming of Jesus into the world is to bring people into the Kingdom of God. The rest of the gospel is a portrayal of folks striving in the face of life's challenges – those linebackers and those tackles and guards trying to block the way - to get there. And, of course, it culminates with Jesus himself crossing the goal line through his crucifixion and resurrection. So for you and me as people of faith, it is likewise our goal to cross into the Kingdom of God. And for purposes of illustration today, we're going to be making our way to **VICTORY!** and this chancel area is the Kingdom. I guess you already know this is holy ground because this is where David and I sit every Sunday, right? Okay, maybe not ☺

Now with the scene set, what does football teach us about making our way to the goal? First lesson: it is clear that our journey to the goal is filled with passion. Look at the context of the game. You've got screaming fans with painted faces, crowds that are delirious when the goal line is breached, athletes that dance frenetically in the end zone when the touchdown is made, and grown men jumping into each other acting like little children. It is a moment of pure joy. One of the great coaches of the game once said: *some people believe football is a matter of life and death but that's not right. I can assure you it is much more important than that.*

Faith, dear friends, is all about passion. It brings with it the incredible news that no matter what we face in this life we will cross the goal if we but believe. How beautifully Jesus illustrates this in Mark's 10<sup>th</sup> chapter when he speaks of the little ones. **"Let the little children come to me, do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."** We've all been around kids when they are excited. Their joy overflows. Jesus welcomes them

and plays with them and makes them feel like the most important people in the world and it ignites their fervor. And he translates this same childlike enthusiasm to all who believe. The gift of faith brings passion to life. Now that's forward progress. We'll call this our initial first down.

Second lesson: life, like football, is unpredictable. I confess... I'm one of those guys who listens to ESPN on the radio. It drives Paula nuts. But I love to listen to the experts who bring all their experience and wisdom to the table to make predictions. And the bottom line is they are wrong as often as they are right. That's because the game is unpredictable. You never know what is going to happen. The quarterback could be injured, a hot head could be thrown out of the game, the weather could turn cold and icy, the ball can take a crazy bounce... These are things out of anyone's control and they can affect the game. And so it is with life!

The gospel of Mark is filled with illustrations to demonstrate this truth. Jesus is constantly dealing with people who face all kinds of challenges. They are worshipping in one story when suddenly a man with an unclean spirit intrudes and cries out in the midst of the synagogue frightening all who have gathered. Totally unexpected. Or what about the encounter with the man who has leprosy? The disciples want to run in the opposite direction afraid of this surprise encounter. But Jesus, of course, has compassion and brings healing to his broken body. As a result, the course of the stranger's life is forever changed by this unpredictable moment. Then there is the horrible storm that suddenly comes out of nowhere when Jesus and the disciples are at sea. All is well until that moment when suddenly the chosen are frozen in their seats and frightened for their lives. Another unpredictable moment. We could thumb through the gospel and see illustration after illustration to prove the point. We never know in life what a new day is going to bring, do we? Sometimes the surprises are glorious. But sometimes they are disastrous. Yet as long as we are walking in faith, we can be confident. And that faith gives us another first down in our drive toward the goal.

Third lesson: in life, like in football, every play is not going to be a success. You come up to the line of scrimmage with great intentions but what happens. Somebody jumps off sides (stand with hands on hips), or there's illegal motion (stand with hand at side and other hand at chest level), or there's delay of game (stand with arms folded), or there's a false start (circle arms in front of body)... or there's unsportsmanlike conduct (stand with arms outstretched and palms down)... you get the point. A lot of things can happen to get in the way of a successful play.

In Mark's 4<sup>th</sup> chapter Jesus tells the marvelous story of the sower. The guy goes out and works hard to sow the seeds but what happens? The birds eat some of the seeds, the weeds strangle other seeds, the sun dries them out so they can't germinate. This is not good news and we take a loss. But then with persistence the sower finds good soil, the seeds take root and produce an untold harvest. Every effort isn't going to succeed, but in life and in faith, we continue trying knowing that eventually and ultimately we will succeed and a good harvest will come. And life brings us right back to where we were because of the times we do succeed.

Fourth Lesson: In life, like in football, you can't go it alone. You need to be part of a team. There are stars and there are superstars in the game of football. There are players that every team would love to have. But in reality, no matter how good they are they cannot do it alone. Payton Manning may be good, but he can't run the ball, he can't catch the ball, he can't

block. He is dependent upon his teammates to succeed. He raises the level of everyone around him, but on his own he cannot win the game.

Life in faith works the same way. A congregation may have the best preacher in the world, but without a loving congregation to surround her and work cooperatively with her, the fellowship will not thrive. We need each other. Christian communities are relational and their strength is always correlated with the ability of people to work together and serve together. In Mark's gospel, after Jesus clearly defines the goal (the Kingdom of God) his first order of business is to call the team together. **"Follow me,"** he says, **"and I will make you fish for people"** (1:17). Even Jesus couldn't do it alone. I'll say it again... We need each other. And he understood that the future of the church was dependent upon the team gathered to work together toward their common hopes and dreams. First Down!

Final Lesson: In life, like in football, the crew chief always has the final say. When the athletes assembly on the field at the beginning of the game, the guy in the white hat always stands at the center of the field with the appointed representatives from each team. It is clear who is in charge. He knows the rules and it's his job to enforce them. And as the game proceeds, the players can scream and complain all they want, but it isn't going to matter. The guy in the white hat is always going to have the final say and he's always going to try to do his job as impartially and as fairly as he can.

I imagine you see the parallel. In life and in faith there is the crew chief who is in charge. And he has defined clearly for us the rules by which we play. Moreover, it is this official who is in charge of the Kingdom that holds us accountable to live within the parameters of these rules.

One day a person well acquainted with all the rules of the game of life came up to the crew chief named Jesus and asked, *Which are the most important rules?* The crew chief looked at him and with a gentle and engaging smile but with a firm tone said, **"The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There (are) no other (rules) greater than these."** (Mark 12:29-31)

It's interesting to note that this first century crew chief took this advice straight from the rule book with which his people were living in that day... the same book, by the way, with which you and I are living today. First Down! And on this note, I think I'll end with one last observation.

Did you notice in our initial reading of today's lesson that the scribe said, *You are right, Jesus.* And he went on to repeat what he had just heard with one additional caveat... *You know Jesus,* he said, *this is really more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.*

Do you know what that really meant? That young man was saying this simple commandment from the lips of the crew chief is really more important than all the rules in the world combined because when everything is said and done this is the way to cross the goal and to get into that Kingdom. Love God... love your neighbor... love yourself. (with hands extended in the air signifying touchdown proclaim)... **VICTORY!**