

Pray Ball?
Reflections on the Serious Liturgical Challenge of Giving Thanks for Baseball

By Mark W. Stamm,
Associate Professor of Christian Worship,
Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

Twenty-Second Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture
June 2-4, 2010

(The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.)

I present this paper as liturgical scholar, ordained United Methodist minister, and baseball fan. I hold membership in the North American Academy of Liturgy and the North Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, as well as the Society for American Baseball Research. Can these distinct realms of discourse and practice have a helpful conversation, or must they remain separate? Committed practitioners have lived both realities, of course, and it takes but little effort to start a baseball conversation in any of these realms. When I began studies in the Boston University Doctor of Theology degree program in 1989, I was informed that clergy could obtain a pass to Fenway Park that would allow one to sit in any unoccupied seat; that is, when one could find an empty seat in the years following the Impossible Dream, Fisk's homer, and the ball that dribbled under Buckner's glove.¹ More than that, my wife is an equally ardent baseball fan as well as the best scorekeeper in the family, so a pass for one ticket would have been a problem. So, when we went to Fenway, we paid. Indeed the story of free passes for God's servants bears the scent of ancient religious myth—perhaps best understood metaphorically and not literally—yet if such passes really existed, I am certain that more than a few ministers, priests, and rabbis made good use of them.

Yes, the church and its leaders go to the ballpark, but can they bring the ballpark to church? Can one, indeed, “pray ball,” doing so with theological integrity and some measure of poetic skill? Given the biblical mandate to “pray without ceasing” (I Thessalonians 5:17) and the Christian vocation to render thanks to God “at all times and for everything ...” (Ephesians 5:20), separating faith and piety from any aspect of life is theologically problematic and an inability to give thanks for an activity raises important ethical questions.² While the need to give thanks appears theologically self-evident, figuring out how to do so is no simple task, yet that did not stop us from trying. And so, on Wednesday, April 2, 2008, the regularly scheduled chapel service at Perkins School of Theology (Southern Methodist University) was titled “Reflections on Baseball.”³ As a professor of worship and also chair of the school’s worship committee, I gave oversight to the planning of the service. An enthusiastic task force worked with me.⁴ But how did we end up planning a worship service about baseball in the first place? I fielded that question at various points throughout the planning process, and I continue to reflect on it.

As I have argued in other venues, liturgical experimentation is part of the pedagogical mission of the seminary chapel.⁵ For instance, between 1970 and 1972, the drafts that led to the United Methodist “Service of Word and Table I”⁶ were tested in Perkins Chapel. In recent years, we planned three Blue Grass Eucharists⁷ and two services in Hip Hop style. The first Hip Hop service involved an eight-month planning process. A Jazz service held in 1959 received wide local publicity. “Reflections on Baseball” stood in this experimental mode.⁸ Although we maintain this tradition of liturgical experimentation such services remain potentially controversial.

The idea for the baseball service actually began as a joke,⁹ although joking and creativity are close spiritual and intellectual cousins. At the first worship committee meeting of the 2007-2008 year, held in August 2007, I laid out the chapel dates for the entire term. Included in that calendar was a listing for the “First Service in Eastertide,” Wednesday March 26. Then I listed “First Service in Baseball Season” for the next Wednesday, April 2. It was a joke but perhaps also a secret fantasy. I was also taking advantage of a unique opportunity in that year’s calendar, given the unusually early date for Easter 2008 and the proximity of April 2nd to Opening Day.¹⁰ That we would be in the shadow of April Fool’s Day did not escape my notice. Opening Day often falls during Lent, which, given its penitential character, would have been inappropriate for a service about baseball. Holy Week or the first service of Eastertide would have been even less appropriate given their focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Spring 2008 calendar allowed us to miss both of those calendrical challenges, yet the idea of a baseball service still felt risky. Nevertheless, my liturgical joke was a relatively safe one when I first spoke it in August 2007, given that April remained seven and a half months in the future. It was inching steadily closer, however, when I gathered my worship committee in mid-January 2008 for the first meeting of spring term. I told them, “Look friends, it was fun to joke about a baseball service, but now it’s time to get serious.” At that, several of my students responded, “Oh no, Dr. Stamm, you have to see if you can give thanks for baseball,” thus catching me with my own teaching. Moreover, that year, an inordinate number of worship committee members were baseball fans. So we planned the service. While doing so was one of the most difficult liturgical exercises that I have attempted, the product was deeply satisfying.

I will discuss the service along with the key challenges related to it: (1) Expressing a theology of play and playing. (2) Expressing an adequate sense of *metanoia* in relation to baseball. I will use the thanksgiving prayer that I composed for the occasion, “A Baseball Berakah,” as the primary lens for this discussion. It was a serious offering to God, as well as a direct response to my worship committee’s dare.

The Prayer Itself

It is difficult to reflect on a prayer without some experience of it, and so I invite you first to read (or pray) the Baseball Berakah. Within the service the Baseball Berakah followed the corporate recitation of Psalm 148, with the prayer extending the poetic and spiritual dynamic of the Psalm. (For an outline of the entire service, see the Appendix).

In Psalm 148, a cosmic choirmaster calls all Creation to praise the Lord. Why? Because God created and God is good. Given the anthropological preoccupations of much religious practice, the psalm offers surprisingly fresh imagery. The choirmaster exhorts “sun and moon” to praise God (vs. 3), then follows my favorite, “sea monsters and all deeps” (vs. 7). Then come exhortations to “fire and hail, snow and frost” (vs. 8) as well as “wild animals and all cattle” (vs. 10)—all called to praise the Lord. Finally the choirmaster turns to human beings, calling “Kings ... and all rulers of the earth ... young men and women alike, old and young together” (vss. 10-11) to join the chorus. Within *The United Methodist Hymnal* the effect of Psalm 148 is heightened through use of a sung response from “Canticle of the Sun,” attributed to St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) and translated by William H. Draper: “Let all things their Creator bless: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!”¹¹ We continued that sung response throughout the Baseball Berakah. By including our prayer in the spiritual dynamic of Psalm 148, we suggested that baseball

and play might also bless God. If sea monsters could praise God, why not baseball and those who love it? Here follows the text of the Baseball Berakah:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, giver of all good gifts.
In your goodness, you created human beings in your image and called us good.
You gave us a Garden to sustain us and be our delight.
Even when we broke your commandment and lost that first Paradise,
You gave us the gift of Sabbath, reminding us that we are not slaves to our work
Or to anyone else.

You commanded us to rest ... and to play.

You put playfulness in the hearts of your creatures,
Dogs run. Dolphins jump. Birds sing. Children run, jump, and sing.
And you bid us participate in that joy.

In time, baseball developed in the midst of that play, invented by children,
and by adults who wanted to keep on playing.

It doesn't really do much that's particularly useful,
But, along with chocolate, swing sets, symphony orchestras, rose gardens,
and blueberry pancakes, not to mention the Final Four and bright red bow
ties, we are grateful for this gift.

(Sung) Let all things their Creator Bless: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

We are thankful:

For those who taught and coached us and those who encouraged us to
play games.
For those with whom we have played and those with whom we have
watched games.
For teams that we have loved and teams that have broken our hearts.
For bats and well-oiled gloves, new balls, and baseball cards.
For hot dogs, peanuts, and Cracker Jacks.
For ballparks and playgrounds, and those who have built and maintained
them.
For games broadcast on the radio and on television.
For Little League and the Angel League.
For *Field of Dreams*, *Bull Durham*, and *A League of Their Own*
For Watson Spolstra and the Baseball Chapel movement.
For Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron, for Hank Greenburg, for Jackie Robinson
and Frank Robinson, for Luis Tiant and Juan Marichal, for Ichiro
Suzuki and Hideo Nomo, for Dorothy Kamenshek, Doris Sams¹²
and the rest of the All American Girls Professional Baseball
League.

(Sung) Let all things their Creator Bless: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

We pray for the following:

In repentance for racism and other forms of bigotry that have plagued the game and excluded people who deserved to play.

For those who teach and coach young children, that they may do so with love and compassion, that they may remember that baseball is a game, and that children are children.

For all who wish to play, especially those with disabilities, that they may find opportunity to do so.

For amateurs and professionals on all levels, their coaches and managers, that they may resist the use of performance enhancing drugs, especially steroids.

For cities and communities, that they may balance desire to provide teams and ballparks with their call to care for the sick, the poor and those in need.

We pray that our playing may not become a new form of selfishness.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, giver of all good gifts, for you have given us play, including baseball.¹³

(Sung) Let all things their Creator Bless: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

+++++

Having experienced the prayer, we will discuss its logic, along with the challenges related to developing the prayer and the entire service. First of all, why was the Berakah form chosen? Of course, few preachers can resist alliteration, thus “Baseball Berakah,” but the reasoning went deeper. It relates to the wider task of liturgical scholarship and its reflections on the church’s worship within culture.

What is a Berakah, and Why Was It An Appropriate Form for This Service?

The work of Christian theology and ministry is art more than science, with the best decisions about what to do emerging from a healthy dialog among scripture wisely

interpreted, tradition critically appropriated, and reason.¹⁴ One can discern what a community believes—that is, how they have appropriated scripture, tradition, and reason—by what they do in their worship. Choices must be made, and they reveal much.

Liturgists must contend with the challenge of particularity. That is, in a particular worship context, one must decide on a specific way of praying. A biblical passage might yield a variety of appropriate readings, but one must choose one of them and work with it. The traditions of synagogue and church offer various liturgical forms and strategies, yet in a particular situation one must choose, leaving other options behind. The challenge increases when one tries to do something new. A liturgy professor's work includes teaching students to do such discernment in a relatively non-anxious way, reminding them that if a particular strategy proves inadequate they can choose another one in the future, including the option "Never again!" We do not, however, want them to be like a pitcher in mid-windup, who suddenly thinks that the slider might have been a better choice than the fastball. I could have made other choices, but I chose the Berakah.

The Berakah is a classic prayer form rooted in Hebrew Scripture. It draws its name from the opening word, which translates to "blessed" as in "Blessed be God, ruler of the Universe, who gives bread." In that classic table prayer no blessing is asked on the bread itself—as if the bread needs to be something other than the life-sustaining gift that it is—but God is blessed (that is, thanked or praised) for the gift. Other biblical examples include the Berakah spoken by Jacob's servant on finding Rebekah (Genesis 24: 27) and this prayer spoken by Solomon at the dedication of the Temple:

Blessed be the Lord, who has given rest to his people Israel according to all that he promised; not one word has failed of all his good promise, which he spoke though his servant Moses. The Lord our God be with us, as he was with our ancestors; may he not leave us or abandon us, but incline our hearts to him, to

walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his ordinances, which he commanded our ancestors. Let these words of mine, with which I pleaded before the Lord, be near to the Lord our God day and night, and may he maintain the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel, as each day requires; so that all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God, there is no other. (First Kings 8: 56-60).

Here is a classic pattern for giving thanks. God is blessed, and Solomon recalls God's covenant faithfulness with reference to the biblical narrative (i.e., "good promise ... through Moses"). Only then does Solomon offer a petition and that in a way consistent with the narrative evoked (i.e., "May he not abandon us ... but incline our hearts ..."). He makes the petition not for a selfish end, but rather as part of the continuing dynamic of thanksgiving (i.e., "so that all the people of the earth may know ...").

I chose the Berakah form because it is capable of expressing thanksgiving and delight for their own sake, with God's goodness as the only justification necessary. At its best, it proceeds in luxuriant fashion, piling up biblical images in an unhurried manner. That thanksgiving would lead directly to several petitions, with the petitions flowing directly from the thanksgiving made. Christian prayers of thanksgiving, particularly Eucharistic prayers, share important characteristics with the Berakah form. God's actions are recalled in a dynamic that Christians call *anamnesis*, or as normally translated from the Greek, remembrance. *Anamnesis* is not nostalgia, but rather a confident invoking of memory, believing that the God who acted in the past will act now.

So the form was chosen, but what images would we use within it? Could we find them? How would we discuss playing?

Challenge #1: Developing and Expressing a Theology of Play and Playing

We experienced this challenge in several ways. First, we were able to find very few liturgical resources (prayers, hymns, or songs) that reflected seriously on playing.

Second, we had to confront the fact that we Protestants (and particularly Methodists) remain suspicious of playing. When we have encouraged play at all, we have tended to justify it primarily in utilitarian terms, as in, playing baseball teaches cooperation, and after all, the fresh air is good for us.

Perhaps “play” and “seriously” seems an odd juxtaposition. Be that as it may, the planning committee and I soon realized that we could easily figure out ways to be silly about baseball. For instance, I appealed to The Order of Saint Luke¹⁵ discussion list soliciting hymn and prayer possibilities for our baseball service. Little came of my query with the exception of a common meter (86.86) adaptation of Milton Bracker’s 1962 poem about umpires:

The umpire is a lonely man
Whose calls are known to every fan.¹⁶

In order to fit common meter, our version would have changed “known to every fan” to “known to all.”¹⁷ We enjoyed the poem and thought about other interesting verses that we could add, but realized that none of them met our goal of reflecting seriously on baseball. The committee considered other songs like “The Ballgame” by Sister Wynona Carr,¹⁸ which employs baseball imagery to discuss spiritual challenges like temptation and sin, yet the song is mostly about the challenges faced by biblical figures like Daniel and Job and is not really about baseball itself. It was entertaining, but not particularly helpful.

Unfortunately, in the one-month search leading up to the service, we found only one hymn that offered a positive reference to playing: “Come, O Sabbath Day” in *Singing the Living Tradition*, a Unitarian Universalist hymnal. Stanza three proclaims,

Work and sorrow cast away!
Sabbath is for prayer and play.
With the setting of the sun,

let a cheering message come:
Thou shalt rest. Thou shalt rest.¹⁹

That was all. We found nothing that addresses baseball or sports culture. Although my search continues, and I have challenged students to join me in it, we believe that we have discovered a gap in the liturgical resources that raises important questions: Do we really believe in playing, that it has any intrinsic value? Do we have anything to say about baseball and sports culture?

As to the problems caused by Protestant/Methodist formation, Methodism's tendency to exalt heroic, sacrificial work is well established. Such zeal is a strength of the movement and also its shadow side. We tell stories about our eighteenth century founder, itinerant Church of England priest John Wesley and his habit of rising daily at 4 am for prayers and other spiritual exercises. We tell stories about early American Methodist itinerant preachers who rode and preached until they exhausted themselves. The tendency to overwork takes ritual form in Wesley's historic examination administered to new ordinands, charging them to "Be diligent ... Never be triflingly employed. Never trifle away time."²⁰ By insisting that clergy "never trifle away time" we may be contradicting the commandment on Sabbath keeping, which is an invitation to experience life as something other than work. That more than a few religious persons have turned Sabbath keeping into its own peculiar burden is another matter. In the baseball service we directly challenged the tendency to over work in the "Greeting," the opening words of the service (see Appendix). We recalled the account of the first Sabbath (Genesis 2: 1-3) after which we paused and I (as leader) said, "You might consider it." Then I put Wesley's words in the mouth of the congregation in a playful critique: "May we trifle away some time?" to which I responded with further spoofing of

Wesley's words: "Yes, diligently! ... Play Ball!" The greeting ended not with words from Wesley, but rather from that well-known advocate of playing, Ernie Banks; and so the congregation responded, "Even better, 'Let's play two!'"

How would I discuss play within the Baseball Berakah? The biblical images came from the two creation stories (Genesis 1-2), including the aforementioned reference to Sabbath (Genesis 2: 1-3), as well as the story about the loss of the Garden (Genesis 3). The Creation stories express deep delight in God's works: Light ... waters and lands gathered ... birds multiplied ... creeping things ... human beings, male and female ... every green plant for food ... all called good, indeed "very good" (Genesis 1: 3, 9-10, 22, 24, 27, 31, etc.). The Garden was filled with trees "pleasant to sight and good for food" (Genesis 2:9). Humanity, fully and unashamedly sexual (Genesis 2: 24-25), was given the Garden. Here is a biblical vision of delight for the sake of delight—that is, play. While the story ends with a narrative of failure and loss (Genesis 3), the gift of Sabbath remained, almost like a weekly return to the Garden.

I evoked images from those biblical narratives and then assumed poetic license in ascribing playfulness to creatures, which I further related to the playfulness of human creatures, especially children. Baseball, says the prayer, emerged amidst the playfulness of children and adults who wanted to continue playing. As historians have known for some time now, this assertion reflects the origins of baseball much better than the Abner Doubleday myth,²¹ yet why retain imagery from the biblical creation myth and not from the Doubleday story? My answer has to do with the *telos* (or goal) toward which each myth was formed. When heard well, the Genesis stories serve to evoke wonder, awe, and thanksgiving for creation as well as a vocation to stewardship. Doubleday/Cooperstown

emerged as a function of American insecurities present at the beginning of the twentieth century and thus its original purpose was nationalistic,²² an impulse that often clashes with the transcultural and catholic *telos* of Christian prayer at its best.

The playing that I tried to evoke in the Baseball Berakah is non-utilitarian, play done for the sake of playing. Thus my statement that “it doesn’t do much that’s particularly useful” and the riff that took me from chocolate and swing sets to bright red bow ties. Several conversations stand behind this paragraph, and one could challenge its assertions at various points.²³ For instance, some assert that moderate amounts of dark chocolate are good for cardiac health,²⁴ yet do people eat it primarily because it is good for them? Blessed is the one who receives such a prescription.

The prayer does not mention winning or losing, although both may be implied in the thanksgiving for “teams that we have loved and teams that have broken our hearts.” That I did not mention winning is not to say that players should not strive for excellence. Who trusts an artist who is not a perfectionist or a ballplayer who does not try to win? Something is lost aesthetically when players give less than full effort. But, winning is never the only thing. It simply cannot be so, or else much of our experience of enjoying baseball—both as players and as fans--makes little sense. For most, winning happens too infrequently.

Most of our deepest joys come in the crisp and rhythmic slap of ball on leather, the feel of a solid hit or watching an excellent play. My favorite Buck O’Neil story is his narrative about “the sound.” As he recalled it, he first heard it when Babe Ruth was hitting, “a distinct sound, like a small stick of dynamite going off.” He heard it again several years later, while Josh Gibson was taking batting practice. As he described it,

“almost fifty years” passed before he heard such a sound again, this time from Bo Jackson in Kansas City. “I heard that ball sound as if the Babe or Josh were still down there. *Pow! Pow! Pow!*” O’Neil vowed that he would continue visiting “ballpark(s) until I hear that sound again.”²⁵ His comments express a delight that many longtime fans and players experience. It partakes of a joy far deeper than transitory success or failure. In the prayer, I tried to capture some of that deeper sense of joy, of playfulness. Yet, that is not all that I intended for the prayer. If the Baseball Berakah were to be Christian prayer in the fullest sense, it had to express an adequate sense of *metanoia*, and that in direct relation to baseball as we know it. Fulfilling that goal was the second challenge.

Challenge #2: Expressing an Appropriate *Metanoia*

What do I mean by *metanoia*? It is a Greek term that appears in the New Testament in both noun and verb forms and is commonly translated “repentance” or “repent.” One hears its dynamic in this summary of Jesus’ preaching: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1: 14-15). Literally, *metanoia* means to turn around or to think in a new way. The idea of repentance is often associated with particular sins and the sorrow that one may feel about them, yet describing *metanoia* in those terms alone runs the risk of limiting the concept to personal piety. Broadly understood, *metanoia* is the biblically informed discerning of God’s vision for the fullness of human life—God’s Kingdom or reign-- along with committed movement toward that vision. Such turning may involve tears, and it usually involves active supplication as one names a problem specifically and then speaks an alternative vision. The community expects that such praying will shape those who do it, that their actions will come to reflect the prayers that they speak. A

community that prays well works at both ends of this liturgical and missional dynamic, and it is very difficult to do so without believing that God is actively at work in the process. The baseball prayer needed to express such a committed turning toward the reign of God.

Metanoia must often begin with cleaning up religious expression itself. Ritual practices and religious authority are powerful realities, yet they have been misused in many ways. Thus the ancient command against “wrongful use” of the Lord’s name (Exodus 20:7) remains an important warning to all who pray (and, it is not so much a warning against using colorful language after facing a brush back pitch).²⁶ Those who would craft a prayer about baseball must contend with the dubious legacy of bad religion as it relates to sports. Many of us wince when we hear interviews about the game-winning hit begin with pro-forma references to Jesus and the will of God. What does Jesus have to do with giving a hanging curve its just reward? Such testimony is not thanksgiving for baseball per se, but rather baseball exploited as an opportunity to preach, and that not particularly well. Many of these testimonies are triumphalistic in tone, that is, a religion that exults in winning and associates the blessing of God with victory.²⁷ Should we be surprised, however, when we consider the age and relative youthfulness of the ballplayers who make such testimonies? Many of the twenty-something students that one sees as a theological educator need considerable work in the difficult art of speaking about God, and the same goes for theological students twice their age.²⁸ That is one reason why the church insists that its ministers go to school. It is odd that we expect ballplayers to speak well on topics other than baseball, and especially on religion.

A second impediment to *metanoia* is the semi-religious nostalgia that often clouds thinking about baseball. Yearning for a golden age that likely never existed is rarely a helpful religious impulse, nor is it a particularly good reading of baseball history. True *metanoia* must engage life as it stands and does not include the option of returning to a simpler age, perhaps a time before the designated hitter rule was adopted²⁹ or Wrigley Field had lights, or when Babe Ruth hit 714 home runs without using steroids. A more honest appropriation of baseball history must acknowledge, of course, that Wrigley Field without lights was an accident of American history before it became a semi-religious symbol.³⁰ Ruth hit his home runs without steroids, and also without facing Satchel Paige.

If not a nostalgic move, what was I doing when I named the various baseball players, from Ruth and Hank Aaron through Dorothy Kamenshek and Doris Sams? I was, indeed, commemorating the baseball saints. Remembering forbears in the faith is a long-standing practice in Christian congregations and other religions have similar rituals. To what end? Some Christians argue along egalitarian lines to reject the practice entirely, insisting that all believers are saints--ones made holy by the grace of God—and thus none should be lifted up above another. Nevertheless the process is virtually inevitable within religious communities that take corporate history seriously, whether or not their church has an official sanctoral calendar. When communities tell their stories, they often point to persons whose lives embody their best values and aspirations. While the practice is not without nostalgic undertones, it expresses a deeper purpose, for naming the saints is a creative way of imagining the world as it might yet be.

My list was constructed to affirm both baseball excellence as well as inclusivity along racial, ethnic, and gender lines. Since it was intended for the congregation's

hearing, it included names that might reasonably be recognized by persons who know some baseball history. Because they were not as well known as others, I provided an explanatory footnote for Kamenshek and Sams, although mention of them in relation to the AAGPBA raised their profile.

Such lists can be critiqued both for whom they choose and for whom they omit. Since Barry Bonds had passed Hank Aaron as the all-time leader in home runs during the summer of 2007, I might have listed him instead of Aaron. I did not do so for a variety of reasons, including allegations about steroids use.³¹ I could not yet expect the congregation to affirm Bonds as exemplar or symbol of aspiration. Furthermore, Ruth and Aaron are linked in the racially charged atmosphere of Aaron's journey to home run 715, so I retained the Ruth-Aaron pairing. I should have paired Sandy Koufax with Hank Greenburg as a second Jewish representative, especially given Koufax' exemplary religious fidelity at the convergence of Yom Kippur and game one of the 1965 World Series. I simply did not remember Koufax when I was preparing the prayer, and I hope to name him if I offer it again.

While the construction of any commemorative list is an act of theological politics, I realize that I could have taken a more politically provocative turn, perhaps listing a gay representative like Billy Bean³² or umpire Dave Pallone,³³ but neither had approached the level of on-field baseball excellence that the others in the list had attained. I might also have chosen Kenesaw Mountain Landis and Marvin Miller, but I had limited myself to on-field personnel. Indeed naming exemplars requires considerable thought and will often be controversial, dynamics with which the National Baseball Hall of Fame is well acquainted.

The various intercessions related to children and youth provide another vision of *metanoia*. One of the unfortunate developments in contemporary American life has been the increasing pressure on children to achieve at ever-younger ages. Pre-teen children are no longer sent to work in factories, but they are forced to pass standardized tests and compete for league championships, even if everybody receives a trophy. I was concerned when, after a season of coach pitch baseball with no keeping score, the coaches in my then seven year-old son's league decided to stage a playoff at season's end. The atmosphere changed immediately. With that memory in mind, I included the petition about coaches exercising love and compassion, with baseball as game and children as children. At what age is competition appropriate? People of faith might lead the way in asking that question.

I have become a fan of the Angel League and commend its goals; thus the prayer of thanks for it and the petition for persons living with disabilities, that they also might find opportunity to play.³⁴ Without disavowing appropriate competition, might we imagine other possibilities for those who cannot compete well, or at all? Naming the concern in public prayer may bring that day closer. What might a committed Christian presence in youth sports activities look like? No one should go to a baseball game and face the prospect of Sunday School breaking out. But, such programs might be *different*, more concerned with the development of persons and loving the game for its own sake, its own aesthetic, and perhaps a little less concerned with winning as the ultimate goal.³⁵

The petition about steroid use seemed necessary given the abuses of recent years and continuing allegations. I mentioned "amateurs and professionals on all levels" because the problem has touched high school and youth sports as well as the professional

game. Particularly notable is the nationally recognized case of Plano (Texas) High School baseball pitcher Taylor Hooton who committed suicide as the result of steroids induced depression. According to his father, Don Hooton, his coach had told him “he needed to get bigger.”³⁶ My family and I reside in the Plano Independent School District, as do a significant number of Perkins students, so the problem resides close to home. While they represent the problem, Plano ISD, its coaches and students are not alone. Momentarily stepping back from the most tragic aspects of steroids use, those who watch baseball closely and have experienced the aesthetic pleasures of a well-played 1-0 game know that something was lost with the steady parade of home runs and high scoring games. It will take considerable historical investigation to figure out the relative meaning of this generation’s offensive statistics, not an unprecedented challenge for baseball historians but a challenge none-the-less. Alleged steroid use is, of course, not the only possible cause. Smaller playing surfaces may have contributed to an increase in scoring along with a strike zone that appears smaller. Nevertheless, something has been lost and problems exist which must not be denied. The prayer speaks hope for something better.

The prayer also reminds us that baseball and sports exist in relation to the wider community. Any Christian congregation that gathers for prayers without remembering “the sick, the poor, and those in need” is a failed assembly. To forget the poor is to forget the suffering Christ; and so, I included the prayer about communities balancing their ballpark building with care for those in need. Balance is the oft-elusive value named here. No one need argue against enjoying arts and sports performed in well-built venues, but the line between enjoyment and hedonism is easily crossed and selfishness often expresses itself in self-justifying ways. Was Yankee Stadium really worn out, or would

renovations have sufficed? Faith communities should press such questions, and when they actively remember the poor they retain the necessary tension. Naming the problem of selfishness is the first step in resisting it and moving toward a more just community.

Conclusions: Why Was This Service Important?

Was the baseball service worth doing? As noted, one might do such an experimental liturgy and vow, “Never again!” That we have not done another baseball service at Perkins, however, is no reflection on the value of the first one.³⁷ It was a positive experience for the planning committee and the wider community, yet having done the service, we answered the question that began the process in the first place--we could give thanks for baseball. We have felt no compelling need to revisit that question.

Many times, needs discerned in the development of experimental liturgies like the baseball service can also be addressed by adding occasional petitions to the prayers of the people.³⁸ Thus within other services we might periodically offer prayers that focus on youth and community sports programs as well as on baseball. As I plan to argue in emerging work on the practice of intercessory prayer, every congregation should develop and maintain a list titled “Why don’t we pray for ...?”³⁹ Developing such a list would be a corporate act of *metanoia*, in which persons of faith would imagine God’s reign emerging in more and more areas of life. Since baseball holds such a central position in contemporary American culture, serious religious practitioners can hardly avoid engaging it with their prayers, as an expression of both pastoral compassion and prophetic critique.

Perhaps the best thing we did in the baseball service was to name playing as gift of God. Indeed, several hours after the service a student told me that he was now going home to play catch with his children. Given the full lives of theological students--

especially those juggling church work, families, and study--I took this as evidence that our praying had done good work.

By discussing baseball, we also gave people an opportunity to talk about relationships, some with people no longer living. In various testimonies given under the heading “Why do you play? Why do you go to the ballpark?” people talked about going to the ballpark with others—with friends, spouses, parents, grandparents, and children. Remembering the ancestors, along with good friends still living, tends to increase gratitude as well as a positive sense of identity. That we play and pray matters; that we do these things with other people matters even more.

Sometimes a highlight in a worship service comes in an unexpected moment, something outside the control of the people who think that they are in charge. Such was the case in the baseball service. Michael Conrady—Catholic Church organist, student in our Master of Sacred Music program, and baseball fan—played organ and piano for the service. That year he was our most versatile student musician, plus he has a good sense of humor, so having him on the (organ) bench for the baseball service was like sending our ace pitcher to the mound. Uncharacteristically, he did not give me a title for his postlude, nor did he tell me exactly what he was going to do with it. With a slight twinkle in the eye he said, “I want you to have plausible deniability,” and so I did not press the issue. After all, good managers do not over-manage, especially when dealing with their star players. So, after I finished my closing remarks, he began walking the keyboard—dump dump dump dumm ... dump dump dump dumm--and then he played the “charge!” fanfare. Then he settled into J.S. Bach’s choral prelude “Wachet auf, ruft

uns die Stimme” BMV 645, yet Bach’s countermelody had been replaced with echoes of
“Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” He wrote,

I sat down with the score one afternoon, penciled out a rough draft of how “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” might fit instead of the “Wachet auf” tune, gave it a couple of brief run-throughs and left the rest up to chance. I have to admit, it came out better than I’d hoped.⁴⁰

Like the best improvisations, Michael Conrady’s performance arose from a combination of technical competence, experience, and imagination. Moments like that are essentially unrepeatable and thus they are best appreciated when we simply hold them in grateful memory. Willie’s catch in the 1954 World Series, Brooks Robinson’s cluster of fielding gems in 1970, and Conrady’s postlude in 2008—they happened but once. Perhaps we should regard “Reflections on Baseball” in a similar way.

Appendix: Order of Worship for “Reflections on Baseball”

*Greeting:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good.
And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done,
And God rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.

You might consider it.
May we trifle away some time?
Yes, diligently... Play Ball!
Even better, “Let’s play two.”

*(Sung) “Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all who breathe away,
they fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day.”⁴¹*

*Hymn: “Come, O Sabbath Day” *Singing the Living Tradition* 204

*Prayer of Thanksgiving:

Praised are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the universe.
With Divine wisdom You have made our bodies,
Combining veins, arteries and vital organs
Into a finely balanced network.
Wondrous Maker and Sustainer of life,
Were one of them to fail--
How well we are aware--

We would lack the strength to stand in awe before You.
Blessed are you, Eternal One,
Source of our health and strength.⁴²
Amen.

Hymn: Psalm 90: 1-8, 12 (metrical)⁴³
Readings from the Hebrew Scriptures:⁴⁴

Genesis 2: 4-9

Deuteronomy 5: 12-15

Testimonies from the Fans:⁴⁵

Why do you play?

Why do you go to the Ballpark?

*Hymn: "Sacred the Body" *The Faith We Sing* 2228⁴⁶

A Reading from the New Testament: Galatians 3: 23-29⁴⁷

"Can Anyone Play? A Story of Two Methodists":⁴⁸ A Reflection by Dr. Kathleen
Sullivan Porter

Psalm 148: *UMH* p. 861-62

A Baseball Berakah (Prayer of Thanksgiving), with Intercessions.⁴⁹

The Wrap-Up: Dr. Mark W. Stamm

Postlude

*Please Stand, as you are able.

¹ Given current Fenway Park attendance, it is hard to imagine that only 10,154 fans (slightly less than 1/3rd capacity at the time) attended Ted Williams' last game on September 28, 1960. <http://www.retrosheet.org/boxesetc/1960/B09280BOS1960.htm> Accessed April 23, 2010.

² Note Romans chapter 14, especially verses 5-6. Paul the Apostle discusses the ethics of dietary rules and calendar keeping as experienced in his Hellenistic context. Practices were not uniform, and he argues in support of diversity. His appeal to conscience applies in many contexts for which scripture offers no direct guidance.

Vincent Donovan relates a story of Masai converts to Christianity who came to realize that one of their dances could not be offered within the Eucharist. Given that insight, they realized that they needed to give up the dance altogether. Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978), 125.

³ Mid-day chapel services of approximately fifty minutes length are held at Perkins on Wednesdays and Thursdays during fall and spring terms.

⁴ In addition to myself as chair, the task force for the baseball service included SMU faculty colleague and baseball scholar Kathleen Sullivan Porter, as well as the following Perkins students: Michael Conrady, Justin Hancock, James Hunt, Jackie Lamb, Mary Martin, Geoffrey Moore, Elizabeth Tatum, Heath Williams, Jeanne Williams, and Jared Williams.

⁵ "My Cup Runneth Over? Seminary Chapel As A Laboratory" in *Common Worship in Theological Education* edited by Todd E. Johnson and Siobhán Garrigan (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 42-61.

“What Are We Doing? Thoughts About a Seminary Chapel Program in an Ecumenical Setting” *Worship* 84:2 (March 2010), 121-37.

⁶ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 6-11.

⁷ Mark W. Stamm, “Blue Grass Liturgy: A Window on Teaching Liturgy” *Perspective* (Perkins School of Theology) (Spring 2008), 17.

⁸ “What Are We Doing? 133-35

⁹ *Ibid.* 133-35.

¹⁰ The next opportunity almost as good as 2008 does not arrive until 2035, when Easter will occur on March 25th. “Table and Rules for Finding the Date of Easter Day,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 880-83.

¹¹ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 861. See also hymn #62, “All Creatures of Our God and King,” stanza 7. See also Carlton R. Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1993), 189-90.

¹² Kamenshek was a seven-time All-Star in the AAGPBL and was its batting champion in 1946 and 1947 while playing for the Rockford Peaches. Sams, who played for the Muskegon Lassies, was AAGPBL Player of the Year in 1947 and 1949 and was a five-time All-Star. *The Origins and History of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League* by Merrie A. Fidler. Foreword by Jean Cione. (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2006).

¹³ Prayer copyright © 2008, by Mark W. Stamm. All rights reserved.

¹⁴ Sixteenth century Anglican theologian Richard Hooker developed this theological method—scripture, tradition, reason—in his *Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*. For a concise summary of Hooker’s process, see *The Spirit of Anglicanism: Hooker, Maurice, Temple*. William J. Wolf, editor, with John E. Booty, and Owen C. Thomas (Wilton, Connecticut: Morehouse-Barlow Company, Inc., 1979), 1-45.

¹⁵ The Order of Saint Luke is “a religious order rooted in Methodism dedicated to sacramental and liturgical scholarship, education, and practice.” For further details see www.saint-luke.org.

¹⁶ Milton Bracker, “The Umpire,” in “Maris in the Spring, Tra-la, Tra-la,” *The New York Times* (April 8, 1962), 33.

¹⁷ I am grateful to United Methodist pastor, baseball fan, and sometimes umpire Sky Lowe-McCracken for pointing me to this verse and suggesting its adaptation.

¹⁸ Sister Wynona Carr, “The Ballgame,” Specialty Records, 1953. See also *Baseball’s Greatest Hits* ©1989 Rhino Records, Inc.

¹⁹ Words after Gustav Gottheil, “Come, O Sabbath Day,” *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: The Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993), 204.

²⁰ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), paragraph 336.19a.

²¹ David Block, *Baseball Before We Knew It, A Search for the Roots of the Game* (Lincoln, Nebraska and London, UK: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

²² *Ibid.*, chapter one, “Uncertainty as to Paternity,” 1-21, and Appendix 4, “The Letters of Abner Graves,” 252-56.

²³ Prayer texts that will be used liturgically—that is, within the corporate worship of the community—should be discussed within the community before they are used.

²⁴ <http://www.allchocolate.com/health/basics/> Accessed April 26, 2010.

²⁵ Buck O’Neil, with Steve Wulf and David Conrads. Foreword by Ken Burns. *I Was Right on Time, My Journey from the Negro Leagues to the Major Leagues*. (New York, New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996), 3-4.

²⁶ Indeed, for Robin Ventura v. Nolan Ryan, August 4, 1993, a little colorful language might have proved a better option than charging the mound.

²⁷ Tom Krattenmaker critiques this form of discourse in *Onward Christian Athletes, Turning Ballparks into Pulpits and Players into Preachers* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010).

²⁸ For that matter, it is equally important that professors retain proper humility in their speaking about God. Those who believe that they have the subject mastered can do considerable harm.

²⁹ Norman L. Macht’s recently published biography of Connie Mack is excellent work for a number of reasons, not least for its level of historical detail. I was delighted to read his story that Henry Chadwick, venerable “Father of Baseball,” advocated for the designated hitter rule at the 1903 Peace Conference between the National and American Leagues. Macht notes that Chadwick’s petition was rejected, but the fact that one of the professional game’s founders called for adoption of the D.H. rule calls into question opposing it in the name of a perceived ancient purity. *Connie Mack and the Early Years of Baseball* (Lincoln, NE, and London, UK: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 305.

³⁰ Philip K. Wrigley was ready to make his park one of the first with lights before the Japanese navy attacked Pearl Harbor and he then donated his newly purchased light standards to the war effort. Phil J. Lowry, *Green Cathedrals, the Ultimate Celebration of Major League and Negro League Ballparks* (New York: Walker and Company, 2006), 58

³¹ Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams, *Game of Shadows, Barry Bonds, BALCO, and the Steroids Scandal that Rocked Professional Sports* (New York, New York: Gotham Books, 2006), 199-207, etc.

³² Billy Bean with Chris Bull, *Going the Other Way, Lessons From a Life In and Out of Major League Baseball* (New York, New York: Marlowe and Company, 2003).

³³ Dave Pallone with Alan Steinberg, *Behind the Mask, My Double Life in Baseball* (New York, New York: Viking Penguin, 1990).

³⁴ See “Angel League Athletic Association of Texas.”

<http://volunteer.united-e-way.org/vmc/org/222800.html> Accessed April 27, 2010.

³⁵ I am grateful to Perkins graduate Beth Lutz, Sports Ministry Director at Trietsch Memorial United Methodist Church in Flower Mound, Texas. She is a commissioned minister, Deacon track, in the North Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. Her work pushes me to think about this question.

³⁶ <http://www.taylorhooton.org/> Accessed April 21, 2010. Don Hooton testified about his son’s death during the same set of congressional hearings in which Rafael Palmeiro, Mark McGwire, and others testified.

³⁷ I have done other baseball-related work, including this paper. On March 6, 2010, I led a one-day course for our Perkins Theological School for the Laity that I called “One, Two, Three Strikes You’re Out’: Reflections on Baseball and Human Frailty.”

³⁸ For a description of the history and theology of these prayers, see *Documents on the Liturgy, 1963-1979, Conciliar, Papal, and Curial Texts*, International Commission on English in the Liturgy, A Joint Commission of Catholic Bishops’ Conferences (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 593-605.

³⁹ My current list includes, among others, (1) high school teachers, (2) veterinarians and people who care for animals, and (3) persons sitting in traffic jams. It also includes prayers for persons awaiting execution, their families and victims.

⁴⁰ E-mail correspondence with Michael Conrady, April 29, 2010.

⁴¹ The greeting and its sources is discussed in the body of the paper, pages 10-11. The sung conclusion is stanza five of Isaac Watts’ paraphrase of Psalm 90, known as “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” sung to ST. ANNE. *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 117.

Psalm 90 speaks to the brevity of human lifespan and then calls God’s faithful to use that time well. The double meaning in “opening day” was available to those inclined to hear it.

⁴² A Sabbath prayer celebrating embodiment as good gift.

<http://tikkunger.com/2006/08/16/hashem-gratitude-the-body-spiritual-stewardship>

Accessed March 13, 2008.

⁴³ Christopher L. Webber, *A New Metrical Psalter* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1986), 142. Here is a fuller presentation of the Psalm 90 to which the greeting alludes. As with the phrase in the greeting, we sang it to ST. ANNE.

⁴⁴ With these two readings, we placed before the congregation themes that would be developed in the Baseball Berakah, the primeval Garden and the gift of Sabbath.

⁴⁵ The “fans” were members of the planning committee. When we began our work together, I had used these two questions for brainstorming. The discussion that it sparked was so good that we decided that it should spill over into the service itself.

⁴⁶ This 1997 hymn by contemporary writer Ruth Duck celebrates embodiment, including racial diversity, calling the congregation to “honor each story and song” (stanza 2). As with play, embodiment is another biblical theme that is under represented in the liturgical resources. For the full text of the hymn, see *The Faith We Sing* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2000), 2228.

Along with the Galatians reading to follow, this hymn would prepare the congregation for Dr. Porter’s reflection on Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey.

⁴⁷ Part of the Apostle Paul’s impassioned plea to a racially and ethnically divided Galatian church. For those baptized into Christ “There is no longer Jew or Greek ... slave or free ... male and female.” In many ways, the church still struggles to hear it.

⁴⁸ See above, note 47. The Methodist background of both Rickey and Robinson figured prominently in their respective character and commitments.

⁴⁹ The Baseball Berakah is presented in full on pages 5-6 of the paper.