

Does God Really Care Who Wins the Big Game? Some Thoughts about Prayer

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:35-39

February 4, 2018

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Got thirty seconds? And \$5 million? If so, you too can have a commercial during the Super Bowl tonight. That's right! For just \$5 million you can have a 30 second commercial.

We love our Super Bowl, don't we? An estimated 100 million Americans will be watching tonight on TV. The relatively few who actually enter U. S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis will pay a premium. The cheapest tickets on StubHub have been running about \$4,100. Average ticket prices have been about \$5,600. If you are a super fan and are willing to spring for luxury, get ready to mortgage your house, for the most expensive ticket packages are \$175,000!

With all the frenzy surrounding tonight's big game, it's hard to imagine that some people don't care about it and do not plan to watch it.

Of course, I'm a pastor, and I watch for how religion and faith are inserted into events like this. A survey of 1,000 U. S. evangelicals revealed that most do not believe God "determines" the outcome of the game. In fact, an overwhelming majority indicated that God does not even care about the game. God, they said, has bigger things to be concerned with. But I can almost guarantee you that in churches across Philadelphia and New England this morning prayers are rising from some of the faithful asking God's favor upon their team.

Does God really care about the big game tonight? And should we pray for our favorite team?

You and I both know that the Bible does not address Super Bowls or football. But it does address prayer. Maybe we can get a little insight from Jesus' practice of prayer in Mark 1. Mark describes an occasion when Jesus rose very early in the morning, went to a deserted place, and

prayed. Why did Jesus do this on this particular occasion? He didn't do it every day. Perhaps it was because of what happened to him the day before. He was in the village of Capernaum. Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus healed her. Apparently word got out that a healer was in town, and later that day the townspeople flocked to Jesus bringing their sick and needy. Mark says that "the whole city" gathered at his door, and Jesus healed many.

Then early the next morning Jesus went to a deserted place to pray. Why?

Mark gives us an important clue to the meaning of all this with his choice of words. The word that is translated "deserted place" is used in verse twelve also. There Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the "wilderness," and for forty days he was tempted by Satan. The word translated "wilderness" in verse twelve is the same word translated as "deserted place" in our text. Mark was telling us that Jesus was facing another temptation in the village of Capernaum. News of a healer spread fast. First, Peter's mother-in-law. Then scores of townspeople. Jesus was becoming a medical celebrity. The Dr. Oz of his day.

So why did he leave before the sun rose? To get ahead of the crowd. Had he waited until later in the morning, the whole city would have been gathered at his door again. They would have been there again with all their sick and needy, expecting him to perform more miracles. Notice what Jesus' disciples said when they finally found him, "Everyone is searching for you."

Everyone. I bet they were. All those folks with sick loved ones. All those folks who needed healing. A miracle. Everyone was at his door again. Where is Dr. Oz?

What was the temptation Jesus faced in Capernaum? It was a temptation to do a good thing as the expense of the main thing. It was a temptation to become sidetracked. To stay in Capernaum and heal sick people. While staying in Capernaum to heal sick people was a good thing, that was not his calling. That was not his mission. His mission, as he told his disciples, was to "proclaim the message...for that is what I came out to do."

Here's what I think Jesus was facing. He cared about all those sick and needy people. He did not want to turn his back on them. But he was not a medical missionary. He was on a mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God, and he must not turn his back on that mission. So he went off to a deserted place to pray. He gathered himself, refocused himself, and then reminded his disciples of his mission. Our text ends with these words: "And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues...."

I don't think it is quite accurate to say that God doesn't care about the Super Bowl. I don't think God will influence the outcome one way or the other. It is not exactly accurate to say that God doesn't care because, like Jesus, God cares about people. God cares about football players. And fans. God cares about all people, as this table reminds us.

So here's my suggestion. If you really care about the big game tonight, talk with God about it. And when the game is over, regardless of who wins, keep talking.

A Prayer of Confession is printed in your worship guide. Join me as we confess our sins together.

Prayer of Confession before the Lord's Table

Our gracious God, we lower our heads before You and confess that we have too often forgotten that we are Your daughters and sons. Sometimes we live as if there is no God, and we fall short of being a credible witness to You. For these failures and many others, we ask Your forgiveness. Look with kindness upon each of us and lift us for service in Your world. Hear our silent prayers of confession....

Assurance of Pardon from Psalm 103

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. By God's grace, we are forgiven. Amen.