

# MAY I PLAY TOO?

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2016  
Mother's Day

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*

## **Participation: Couch Potato to Player**

My sermon this morning is about participation. It might sound a little odd as a topic, and maybe it is, but bear with me. The word comes from the Latin “participle,” a verbal form having the characteristics of both an adjective and a verb. The gist of it, “participation,” is that it’s different from being a spectator. Being a participant versus being a watcher. Being a player versus being a benchwarmer, for example.

Truth be told, there are many instances in my life when I would much rather have been a spectator than a participant. If you came in from the parking lot through that entrance into the church, you are aware that the minister drives a Mini Cooper. I have been encouraged many times to go to Watkins Glen and take Race Driving 101. I’ve thought long and hard about that, but I’ve decided that race driving is a fine thing for me to watch and not to do. I have never been sky-diving; I have never been bungee-jumping off high bridges. I have been told that generally you live. However, I’m not going to try it.

But actually participating, being a player versus being a spectator, has an inherent joy, an inherent satisfaction. It’s fun to be part of a team. That probably also explains why there is such joy in being a participant.

Take yourself back to kindergarten for a moment. You’re out on the playing ground, and

a group of kids decide to play kick ball. You’ve got two captains who somehow emerged, and then all the kids who want to play kick ball stand in a little group, while the two captains begin choosing. “Okay. I choose this kid,” and then the next captain chooses that kid. Do you remember the fear, the anxiety of not being chosen? How bad it feels not to be on one of those teams because you’re too small or for whatever reason? We all remember that kind of hurtful feeling.

## **Two Stories: A 13-Year-Old Heroine . . .**

I myself never experienced that. I was a pretty athletic kid, bigger than normal. I was always one of the first ones chosen.

But I’d like to tell you two stories this morning. One of them is short; one of them is longer. One of them is more general; one of them has a lot of detail. But both stories are about sports heroes.

The first one is about Mo’ne Davis. On August 15, 2014, when she was only 13 years old, Mo’ne became the first kid ever, male or female, to pitch a Little League World Series shutout. She did it in a two-hit game with her team, the Taney Dragons of Philadelphia. After the game, she signed several baseballs, a few of which went up for sale on eBay, and you can’t afford them.

Shortly thereafter, Mo’ne became the only Little League player ever to grace the cover

of “Sports Illustrated.” And then shortly after that you might have seen the commercial for Chevrolet that shows her pitching, and with the magnificent line in which she says, “I throw 70 miles per hour, and that’s throwing like a girl.” It’s a great commercial, and it’s a great moment.

### **. . . Last to Be Picked, but Ability to Wait**

The other story smacks of ego. I’m going to confess that right up front. However, I have to give you the details of the story for this to make sense. I mentioned that I was never one of those not to be picked on the playground for the kick-ball team. As a child, I never experienced that fear, that anxiety of never being on the team until later, when I was an adult.

We have a friend, Tracy and I, who lives down in Pennsylvania. He owns about a hundred acres or so of beautifully landscaped land and a little trout stream that meanders through it. He and his wife throw a really big party once every summer in July. Tracy and I go there frequently, and it’s a long weekend kind of party, like four or five days.

One of the highlights of the party is an annual softball game. The host has a field in the shape of a quarter-circle, and he decided to build a softball diamond on that field.

One important detail in this story is that my friend is a homebuilder, and he invites all of his friends from over the years, so there are dozens and dozens of people who come to this expanded party. However, the majority of his friends are construction workers, and so for this softball game, they choose two captains, and the rest of us stand there, just like in kindergarten, waiting to be picked for one team or the other.

Now being construction workers, these guys have bodies built for the job. They have muscles, they’re tough, they’re strong, they’re big. And then there’s me, the minister. Sure enough, the captains chose back and forth, and I was the last one to be picked. Whoever chose last got stuck with the minister.

Now the details. It turns out that I have a skill they didn’t know about, and that is, I have the ability to wait. So when my first turn at bat came, I scanned this quarter-circle softball field, peered down the left-field line and noticed that, as soon as you get into foul territory, it’s all woods. It was plain to me that you could hit foul balls into the woods with impunity because they would not be caught in there. They would hit the trees before they could be caught for an out.

### **Creating Confusion for the Outfielders**

So I hit three foul balls down the left-field side into the trees without a chance of being grabbed by the leftfielder. But I’m watching the outfielders. The leftfielder is on the line. The centerfielder has moved way over to the left, and the rightfielder is now deep in center. And then comes a pitch from heaven, high and outside, and I send a hard line drive right down the first-base line. As I run around the bases, it was a home run from the minister. It was emotionally gratifying.

At bat for the second time, I hit two more foul balls into the woods, down the left. Now the outfielders, what should they do at this point? They were confused. The leftfielder stays on the left-field line, the centerfielder is still moved over to the left, but the rightfielder stays put on the right. He seems to have learned his lesson, but he left a huge gap in right center.

I hit the next pitch as a line drive right over the second baseman's head. It rolled and rolled and rolled. Home run number two.

At bat number three, what would you do as an outfielder? I hit three foul balls down the right-field line. The poor outfielders really didn't know what to do. They're even more confused at this point. Every ball that I had hit fair was either in right or right center, so all three of them move over to the right, leaving the left-field line exposed. A gorgeous pitch whizzes into the strike zone, and I slammed the ball right over the third baseman's head. It starts rolling fast, straight down the line.

Now I know this is an egocentric story. You get that. But the reason I'm telling you this yarn is that there is a singular joy, a tear-in-your-eye joy because, when you're rounding the bases, going from first to second, particularly when you're rounding second, is when you have a moment to look into the outfield and assess your chances. "Can I make it to third?" "Can I make it home?" Should I stop at second?" What do *you* do now? You have a chance to get information as you round second base. At that point, I realized I didn't even need to hurry.

Home run number three. I felt like a hero.

Thanks for listening to my story.

### **"The Great Ends of the Church"**

Now, what's this got to do with anything?

One of the finest articulations that I've ever come across for the actual purpose of a church, why the church should even exist in the first place, is a document called "The Great Ends of the Church. It was originally adopted by the United Presbyterian Church of North America in 1910 and later became

part of the constitution of the newly merged Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1958. The document provides what it says is the whole reason for the existence of the church:

- ✠ "The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.
- ✠ "The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.
- ✠ "The maintenance of divine worship.
- ✠ "The preservation of the truth.
- ✠ "The promotion of social righteousness.
- ✠ "The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."

That's why we exist. Look at the phrasing of "The Great Ends of the Church": proclamation of the gospel; shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship; maintenance of divine worship; preservation of the truth; promotion of social righteousness; and exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven. All of these reasons infer actions that the church must undertake in order to exist.

### **A Shift from Sports to Religion**

Now let me ask you three major questions that apply to sports. Then apply them to your faith:

- 📖 Does your religion — your belief system, the faith that you have in your heart — does the practice of your religion bear the marks of participation?

For example, exhaustion, grass stains, sweat, and maybe even bruises. When you head to the sideline of your religion to catch your breath, did you have fun? Was it exhilarating? Do you have this deep desire after you've caught your breath in your religion to say, "Put me back in, coach!"?

📖 Another question: Does the practice of your religion, whatever your belief system is, deep inside your heart and your mind, does the practice of your religion spend time on deciding who can't play? Does it waste a moment on that?

📖 Yet another question: Does your religion encourage you to practice, to get better? Through the spiritual disciplines of meditation and study and contemplation and work for the betterment of humanity, the betterment of our world, does your religion encourage you to practice and get better?

In a famous verse, found in II Peter 1:3-4, Peter writes: "Through this gift, you are sharers in the divine nature itself." And that word, "sharers," can also be translated as "participant," "partaker." In other words, do not be satisfied with being a mere spectator. The coach is calling you to get back in there and play.

Is it fearful? Yes. No matter what the sport is, there's possible failure in it. You can fall off your bicycle. You can be lousy at whatever it is. You can fumble the football. You can do an air ball with a basketball. And you can strike out in baseball. In the most famous baseball statistic of all time: Babe Ruth hit

714 home runs. But during the course of his illustrious career, he struck out 1,330 times.

### **A Progression from Couch Potato to Hero**

The main motivation for going through this progression is to see the movement in it: From couch potato to spectator to benchwarmer to player to hero. I gave you true stories about the hero side of sports, but there is a progression that we can use as a sustained metaphor for the way in which we approach our lives, every facet of our lives.

Do you want to be a couch potato or a spectator? At least you get tickets to the game if you're a spectator, but you're not a player. If you're a benchwarmer, you're sort of there, but you're still not a player. Do you want to be a player and maybe a hero? The main motivation of going from one step to another is just simply joy, the joy of progression.

I was raised in Indianapolis. My parents always had a big picnic on the day of the Indianapolis 500 until one year when I asked, "Will we be having a picnic?" And dad said, "Nope. We're going to the race." Well, I can't tell you of my exhilaration about going to the 500 for my very first time as a little kid. To go to the race, to be a spectator rather than a couch potato. And maybe in the future to go from spectator to player. To go from player to hero.

But now here is actually where the analogy breaks down. It doesn't work anymore because we can't all really be players. Some of these sports are tough. Some of them border on violence, when you can get banged up pretty badly. So we can't all be players, let alone heroes. It's not realistic. We're too old, we have a trick knee, we have osteoporosis, arthritis, high blood pressure. So that's where the analogy breaks down.

But it's *not* true in terms of practicing our faith. In those core requirements of working toward justice, working toward peace, the exhibition of love in our lives. We can do that well all of our lives.

### **And No Couch Potatoes Among Mothers**

Today is Mother's Day. The reason we venerate moms is because they bring forth new life, they don't just watch it. There is no such

thing as a mom in theory. They aren't couch potatoes. They aren't spectators. They are players all, hoping to be bench-warmers, at least on the weekends. But players all, and oftentimes heroes.

**Just as we have borne the image of the earthly, we will also bear the image of the heavenly, but it requires practice.**

*Amen.*