



Tackled by Jesus



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

September 13, 2015

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon is available at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2015-09-13-AWW.mp3>.

Tackled by Jesus

Mark 8:27-38

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter
Grace Episcopal Church
The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 13, 2015

What a day! It's Ministry Sunday, the start of a new program year. The choir is back. Sunday School is underway. Mr. C is on the newly refurbished organ. And, of course... football (here the preacher displays a football)! Today is the first Sunday of the NFL season. We have 17 weeks of games, followed by the playoffs, all leading up to Super Bowl 50 on February 7.

Back in the early part of the 20th century, before the Super Bowl became such a huge event, before professional football really existed, college football was a major sport, even bigger and more popular than it is today, and college football players were stars, the focus of a lot of media and public attention.

One of the most well-known players of that era was a man named Roy Riegels, an outstanding defensive lineman and captain for the University of California Bears. In 1929, the Bears played so well they made it all the way to the Rose Bowl where they played the team from Georgia Tech. The Rose Bowl was the football game of the year. Over 70,000 fans filled the stadium in Pasadena. And, the game was covered by every major newspaper in this country.

Midway through the second quarter, the game tied 0-0, the Georgia Tech quarterback fumbled the ball on his own 30-yard line. In a flash, Roy Riegels was there. He picked up the ball and began to run. He was hit, but he spun around. He was hit two more times but still didn't go down. Then, in the middle of this melee, among a blur of uniforms, Roy apparently became confused. When he spun around one more time to avoid another tackle, he saw nothing but open field in front of him, and he took off. Linemen usually aren't very fast, but Roy ran with determination. He ran as fast as he could toward the goal line 70 yards in the distance. A handful of startled Georgia Tech players made a stab at tackling him, but then thought better of it. The broadcaster who was calling the play-by-play on the radio, couldn't believe his eyes. "What's the matter with me?" he shouted. "Am I going crazy?"

Only Roy's teammate, Ben Lom, realized what was happening, and he chased after Roy, screaming as loud as he could, "No. Roy, no. Not that way." Roy was running in the wrong direction.

It is easy to smile or laugh at that story, tell ourselves that would never happen to us. We would never make a mistake like that. But, we all run in the wrong direction sometimes.

We see it happening to Peter in the gospel reading this morning. The passage comes in the exact middle of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus and his disciples have been travelling all over Galilee as Jesus went about his ministry. Now, they are on the outskirts of Caesarea Philippi

when Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

"Some say John the Baptist" they reply," and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

"But who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked.

And, somehow, in that moment, Peter just knew. He knew Jesus was not some run-of-the-mill miracle worker or prophet, running around the countryside like so many others. He knew Jesus was different; knew Jesus was something more. Jesus was God's chosen one, the Messiah, who would save the people of Israel and usher in a new era of peace and righteousness.

Yet, when Jesus began teaching the disciples about his death and resurrection, Peter rebuked him. Peter wanted nothing to do with what Jesus was saying. He didn't want to hear it. Death was not what the Messiah was about, at least not to Peter, and so Peter needed to straighten Jesus out. Peter needed to tell Jesus to get his head on right.

But, it was Peter who did not have his head on right. It was Peter who did not understand. He knew who Jesus was, was the first to know who Jesus was, but he did not know what Jesus was all about. He couldn't see it. He didn't get it. Peter was running in the wrong direction.

Peter is not alone in that, though. The same thing happens to all of us. We know who Jesus is. We come to church. We hear the stories. We say that we are Christians, but then, somehow, for some reason, we don't follow the way of Jesus. Instead, we go off in another direction.

We have seen this recently in a story that made headlines across the country when Kim Davis, the county clerk in Rowan County, Kentucky, refused to issue marriage licenses for same-sex couples because it violated her conscience and Christian beliefs. While we all respect people who want to be true to their faith, denying your fellow human beings their Constitutional and unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is not following the way of Jesus and loving your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said nothing about same-sex marriage, but he did say, "I came to that you might have life and have it abundantly"¹ because Jesus wants all of God's children to live and thrive and love and be happy.

Or, if the example of Kim Davis seems too extreme for you, consider all of the good people who have demonized Kim Davis in recent weeks. I have seen and heard some horrible comments about Davis, many of them from those who say they are Christians, but it is one thing to disagree with another person. It is another thing entirely to disparage and

¹ John 10:10

disrespect them. That is not the way of Jesus, and I have to say, I am as guilty of it as anyone else.

I think what happens is we get so certain of the direction in which we are going we can't see any other way. We are so sure we are right, so positive of what we are doing, that we just put our head down and barrel forward. We keep going and going, without looking up, without paying attention to what is going on around us, without noticing what others are experiencing or feeling, without taking a moment to stop and think and reflect on our actions and behaviors.

Running down the field, that is exactly what happened to Roy Riegels. Roy was not aware of his teammate Ben Lom chasing after him, and he didn't hear Ben's cries to stop. The roar of the crowd was just too much. Roy kept running and running, until Ben finally tackled Roy at the two-yard, just before he scored for the other team.

As you can imagine, Roy was devastated by what he had done. Dejected beyond words, Roy sat in the locker room at halftime, a towel covering his shoulders, his face in his hands, sobbing uncontrollably. When the California coach announced the second-half starters would be the same as the first half, all but Roy headed toward the field. "Coach, I can't do it," Roy said. "I've ruined everything."

The coach looked at him, "Roy, get up and go back out there. The game is only half over."

When we are headed in the wrong direction, we need that kind opportunity. We need someone on our side to stop us. We need to feel that sense of love and forgiveness. We need a second chance, a chance to do better, a chance to get it right. We need a shot at redemption.

And, that is exactly what Jesus offers us, if we immerse ourselves in his life and love. It is cliché to ask, "What would Jesus do?" And yet, at the same time, there is great power in that question. Making his way our way is the way to a better life, for you, for me, for those we love, and for all those around us. It is the way of patience and kindness and understanding. It is the way of loving our neighbor as ourselves. It is the way to get life right. And, it's the road to redemption for all of us.

So, go ahead, let yourself be tackled by Jesus. Amen.