

“Soccer Silence”

Sunday, June 20, 2010: I Kings 19:1-15a; Ps. 42, Luke 8:26-39

The Rev. Peter Faass

“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

This description of the prophet Elijah’s waiting for an encounter with God would also be an apt description of the World Cup Soccer Tournament taking place in South Africa. Around the world in virtually every family, language, nation and tribe on earth there are sounds like great winds splitting mountains, breaking rocks, earth shattering quakes and crackling fire with each opening round match and goal achieved by the vying teams. Every four years this championship event of world soccer – or more accurately football - gathers teams from thirty-two nations from the four corners of the earth. And the din made by their fans in the stadiums and in front of televisions, radios and the internet is over-whelming: as over-whelming as anything Elijah heard on the mountain.

Except in the United States where there is the sound of near sheer silence; well except for those really annoying Vuvuzela horns that South African’s are so fond of blowing incessantly during the matches. Sounding like a billion bussing bumble bees hovering right over your head, Vuvuzelas would pierce any silence, even two oceans away!

Now because all this noise is being made by everybody in the world except us, this is not to imply that God is somehow present - showing favor - in the silence of our American ambivalence toward the most popular sport in the world. On the contrary! Our soccer silence actually indicates a distancing from what God desires for humanity; which is the ever growing understanding, breaking down of barriers and mutual respect between all peoples and nations of the world. So un-like with Elijah, in the case of World Cup Soccer, God is in the noise of peoples gathered together in peace and mutuality to play and watch the beautiful sport. God is in the stadium bleachers reveling in the earth-splitting cheering and Vuvuzelas, and not in our silence. In fact I’m sure I spotted God in a Team Orange jersey yesterday morning!

When you distill the myriad reasons of American’s dispassion toward international soccer I think it comes down to one primary factor: winning. We don’t win a lot. And because of that we don’t take much of an interest.

Conversely while winning the World Cup Soccer tournament is a desired goal of the participating teams and nations, they never stop engaging the competition because they do not win. Trust me I know. The Netherlands team, for whom I root, is referred to as the greatest soccer team in the world to have never won the cup. You can liken the Dutch as being the pre-2004 Boston Red Sox of the football world! We know the pain of almost winning, all too often!

Because the United States is not a major winner in World Cup competition, we are neither fully engaged in the sport and, by our aloofness, end up not fully supporting our national team. (For whom I root unless they happen to be playing, “you know who!”) The irony is that this year the American team really deserves our enthusiastic support with a 1-1 tie game against England and a 3-2 win over Slovenia, (oh, right, that didn’t end up being a win, but rather a 2-2 tie, but that’s another sermon).

For Americans and their engagement in soccer there is a circular argument. We have not historically done well in international soccer. And because we do not win we do not show interest, ergo our silence which is manifest as ambivalence. Our team then suffers from our lack of moral and emotional support, even when they reward our nation and do well, which then sets up the potential for them not to win.

Whew! Let’s get off of that merry-go-round!

It would be wise for us to ponder just how our cultural need to win and dominate everything we encounter as a nation, from sports to diplomacy, from economics to pop culture, informs other peoples and nations about how we will engage them; about how we

view them as citizens of this ever shrinking earth.

All too often we project our wants and our demands onto others, always expecting them to conform to what pleases us. And it is clear that we always want to dominate. This is interpreted by others as arrogance. And our arrogance is not serving us well in the world these days. And arrogance is certainly not the way of God.

We need a paradigm shift in this aspect of our national character. We no longer can maintain the jingoistic stance of seeing ourselves as the greatest nation in the world, but rather we must come to understand ourselves as a great nation and people among many. We must no longer believe the bad theology that God only blesses the United States over and above all the other peoples in the world. The truth is that God blesses all nations and peoples whose ethos and character are formed in the crucible of justice, righteousness and peace. We Americans must learn to let those things go so that we may fully engage all families, languages, nations and tribes as equals, and delight in engaging them in all aspects of human activity with mutual respect and collegiality; this is the way God desires us to behave.

It seems to me that starting this change with altering our approach to soccer is a good thing. By honoring and engaging the World Cup competition fully, recognizing football as the beautiful world sport it is, and whole-heartedly participating with all the other nations of the earth in playing and enjoying it, seems like a wonderfully noisy, earth-quaking, rock-shattering place to begin to shift our own attitudes. Come on try it, you'll like it! And who knows, you may even get to sit next to God cheering in the bleachers?

Amen