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## Celebrating the Community

*“Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.” (Luke 24:52-53)*

I like wearing baseball caps. I have a bunch of them. One is my favorite above all others. It is blue and has one mark on it: “B.” It doesn’t stand for Barry. It stands for Boston, as in Boston Red Sox. I won’t talk about it for long, but indulge me for a moment. After all, we waited 86 years for this moment.

October 27, 2004 was a celebration that I never thought would come. That was the night the Red Sox beat the St. Louis Cardinals to claim the World Series. (Did I mention that they did it in four straight?) Forgive me for delighting in this so. Getting there was not easy or painless. Bucky Dent in 1978. Bill Buckner in 1986. Someone once said that watching the Boston Red Sox was like watching Greek tragedy. In Greek tragedy, you know someone is going to get killed; you just don’t know how it will be done. Watching the Red Sox is a lot like that. You knew they would lose. You just did not know how they would do it. Until October 27, 2004.

When they won that night, and especially when they beat the Yankees (sorry, I just had to get that in at least once), a bond developed among people. E-mails and phone calls and conversations at the water cooler. It did not matter if you knew the other person; there was a sense of oneness when you knew that you shared a common joy and pain. I experienced this at a local coffee shop. I saw a man wearing a ball cap similar to mine. I had never seen him before—no matter, I called out to him and said, “Love your hat!” He smiled

and we waved high-fives to each other. “The Red Sox Nation” is what some call it.

When the game was over on October 27, I spoke with my brother on the phone—just to share in the moment. Then my girls called, and there was the sharing of laughter and tears and stories about Grampie Toi. (How he would have loved this moment!) I realized then that a bond of another type had been formed between my girls and their grandfather who used to love listening to the Sox. This sentiment was apparently felt by many. The Boston Globe printed this article on October 29:

“Despite all that’s been said about a curse, a lot of Red Sox fans weren’t thinking of Babe Ruth or Bucky Dent the moment Boston won the World Series Wednesday night. They were thinking of their favorite uncle who was buried in a Sox jersey, or the hot dog vendor who used to sneak children into Fenway Park, or the neighbor who cried the night the ball went between Bill Buckner’s legs—all the loved ones who should have been there to share the moment” (Peter DeMarco).

After the game and the conversations, it was hard to turn the TV off. I just wanted to linger with the joy of the moment. Sleep could wait another day. The Sox were World Champions tonight. Plus, you never know when you might experience this again—if ever. Eighty-six years is a long time to wait.

All of this leads me to Luke 24:52-53: *“And they were on their knees, worshiping him. They returned to Jerusalem bursting with joy. They spent all their time in the Temple praising God. Yes” (MSG).*

Such was their joy in the victory of the resurrected and ascended Lord that they didn't want to leave it. They were ecstatic and wanted to hang out with each other in the temple, giving praise to God. I wonder what that was like for the religious leaders of the day. They did not believe but were in the temple, carrying out the required sacrifices and worship. What must it have been like to have seen and heard the joyous worship of these disciples?

Please don't think that I am comparing the victory of Jesus to that of a World Series victory. It's not even close. But, if you can relate to that sense of joy, that sense of community that is so great and so precious that you don't want it to end—then you have a mere hint of what it was like for those first believers after Christ's resurrection. In Acts 2, it says of them:

*“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (vv. 42-47).*

This, to me, is the picture of a victory party. It looks to me like a bunch of people who are lingering in the joy of the moment and the celebration. Who can blame them? Their celebration is like no other that has ever been experienced. It is not a temporary one

like that of a World Series. It is an everlasting victory. There is no “wait till next year” when it comes to a victory celebration in Jesus. Ours is the joy of saying, “He is Risen!” “He is Risen, Indeed!” It is an ever present reality that will not be lost or given up. I know all too well how fleeting is the joy of October 27. But for anyone who is in Jesus Christ—the crown of life that one wears by grace will not be taken away. It is eternal!

Much was made in the World Series of certain heroes: Johnny Damon and Curt Schilling, and Manny Ramirez, who was the MVP. People long to shower their adoration upon heroes. We wear shirts with their names on them; we want their photos and autographs. We are willing to pay a lot of money just for the “privilege” of having these things in our possession. We seek to pour our praise on someone great. We long to attach ourselves with someone we admire and respect.

There is, however, only one MVP—in all of Scripture and in all the world—the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God alone is the true hero. There are some amazing people in Scripture, but each one of them had their share of faults and weaknesses. Only One deserves our praise and adoration. God alone is the hero. Yet, incredibly, He wants us to have His name. Better than any autograph or jersey, God places His name upon us in our Baptism. Wherever we go, His name is upon us. It costs us nothing to receive it. It cost Him everything to offer it.

When I envision the Church, I see people gathering together in worship services (and through e-mails and at the water cooler) as they share together a common love and bond in the celebration of Christ's victory. So great is their joy that they linger there with each other, not wanting it to end. Just as the Red Sox victory was and is my victory, even more so—eternally so—is the victory of Christ my victory by means of my Baptism, where I am joined in His death, buried with Him in the grave, and raised with Him in His resurrection (Romans 6:1-14).

Within the Church that Jesus commissioned to carry His message to the world, there is the gathering of people who are so filled with joy that they cannot help but constantly talk about it. When they see strangers in public who wear the cross, or a fish symbol on the bumper of a car, there is an instant bond with this person that causes them to want to wave high-fives to each other from a distance. This is the celebration of community that I see in the Book of Acts. This is the Church that excites me when I see it in action today.

I see a danger, however, when one's faith and certainty of salvation becomes too private. This is not how I see it in Scripture. Salvation is very personal, but it is also communal. Personally, I have received by grace the gift of salvation. Jesus is my Lord. That also means that now, with Him as my King, I am made a citizen of His Kingdom, a Holy Nation like no other. The Church of today needs to lay claim once again on the joy of the celebration of community.

There is one other dimension to the Church, though, that should also be mentioned, for it also is very much a part of the celebration of community. Let's go back to the article in the Boston Globe:

“By yesterday, fans across the globe had posted hundreds of memorials on a website to those they had lost. Postings from London to Melbourne filled 54 pages, some tearful, many bittersweet, others overflowing with happiness. All

recalled great fans who never stopped believing in their team, but did not live to witness the dream . . . fans who posted to the website, as well as those who thought about loved ones Wednesday night as the Sox cruised to victory, agreed that the Red Sox Nation wasn't just on earth.”

My dad, who has been with Jesus for many years now, was a huge Red Sox fan. I do not believe, however, that his joy in heaven is increased by a Red Sox victory. If there is such a thing as a Red Sox Nation, then it is confined here to earth.

But the Church that celebrates the victory of Christ is both here on earth and in heaven. My dad and I share this victory together. When I worship, I am joined with him and all the company of heaven, singing the praises of our Triune God. When I receive the body and blood of my Savior, it is a feast that we share in together.

When you go out today or tomorrow, if you happen to see someone wearing a cross or some sign that they are a Christian, say hello to them. Take a moment to share in the joy of the victory—for we Christians are part of a Holy Nation together. In Christ, we are world champions!

**Prayer:** You, O Christ, are the Victor. You have defeated Satan and death and sin itself. I praise you and honor you, offering you my life this day in thanksgiving for making your victory my own through my Baptism. In your name, **Amen.**

**Challenge:** If you see someone this day wearing a cross or other Christian symbol, acknowledge to them that you too are a part of that “Holy Nation.”

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 24

**From the Book of Concord:** “This teaching offers the following beautiful, wonderful comfort. God made the conversion, righteousness, and salvation of each individual Christian such a high personal concern and intended to remain so faithful to it that ‘even before the foundation of the world’ [Eph. 1:4] he resolved and ‘according to his own purpose’ [2 Tim. 1:9] he preordained how he would bring me to salvation and preserve me in it. <sup>cr</sup>Likewise, he desired to guarantee my salvation so completely and certainly—because it could slip through our fingers so easily through the weakness and wickedness of our flesh or be snatched and taken from our hands through the deceit and power of the devil and the world. For he has preordained this salvation through his eternal intention, which cannot fail or be overthrown, and he has placed it for safekeeping into the almighty hand of our Savior Jesus Christ, from which no one can snatch us away (John 10 [:28]). Therefore, Paul also asks in Romans 8[:28, 35, 39], since we are called in accord with God’s intention, ‘Who will separate us from the love of God in Christ?’” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI: Election, p. 648.45-47).