

Baseball believers

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue



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In 1989, as I was preparing to preach on the 75th anniversary of the dedication and opening of Fourth Presbyterian Church's building on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, I thought it would be interesting to note what else was going in Chicago when the building opened in May 1914. I made an amazing discovery—Wrigley Field opened that same spring.

So I told the congregation that 75 years ago a wonderful new structure on the north side of Chicago opened its doors and that since that day thousands of people have walked through its portals, bringing with them their love, their anxieties, their grief and despair, but also their fierce and relentless hope. These people sat down together. They rose to sing together, joining their voices in praise and adoration. They ate together, passing food and drink to one another, and gave of their treasure to keep the enterprise going. Yes, I told them, 75 years ago Wrigley Field opened for the first time.

People laughed, of course, and then settled in to think about their church. The best part was that the senior management at the *Chicago Tribune*, which owned the Cubs at the time, heard about the sermon and invited me to throw out the first pitch for

the game on July 4. (It was high and inside, but respectable.)

I have followed baseball for 66 years. I remember sitting on the front porch in the evenings with my father, listening on the radio to Rosie Roswell and Bob Prince describe a game at Pittsburgh's Forbes Field. Baseball announcers are interesting characters themselves, many of them loved as much as the players they describe, like Jack Buck, who worked for the Cardinals and Harry Caray, who worked for the White Sox and the Cubs and who started the custom of singing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" in the middle of the seventh inning. Roswell would blow a whistle whenever a Pirate hit a home run, and though the Pirates were not very good in those years, they did have a home run hitter in Ralph Kiner, so Rosie got to blow his whistle a lot.

I arrived in Chicago just in time to see the White Sox win their first American League pennant. I transferred my loyalty to the Cubs during my first two pastorates in Indiana, when the long reach of WGN radio brought Cubs games into our home. We lived in Columbus during the halcyon days of the Cincinnati Reds' "Big Red Machine." Then, coming full circle, I embraced the Cubs again when we moved to the north side of Chicago.

The Pirates remain in my heart, of course, and I am in a near existential crisis when they play the Cubs. However the game turns out, I will both win and lose, rejoice and lament. The Pirates have won three World Series championships during my lifetime, most memorably in 1960 when Pittsburgh upset the heavily favored New York Yankees. The Pirates second baseman Bill Mazeroski hit a home run in the bottom of the ninth to break a 9-9 tie and win the series. It was a moment I have never forgotten. The Cubs, on the other hand, have not won the World Series since 1908 and have created decades of frustration and despair for their followers, with high hopes inevitably crushed, only to be renewed again in the spring.

I sometimes wonder why I care about this game so much. In his new book, *Baseball as a Road to God: Seeing Beyond the Game*, John Sexton reinforces my lifelong interest, commitment and enthusiasm. Sexton says that baseball, the only game without a clock, requires concentrated attention and teaches us to "live slow and notice." He observes that fathers want to give their children something to love, something bigger than themselves to be part of. It is often a religion, and it is often baseball and a team. My parents, thanks be to God, gave me both.