

Above every game (Ephesians 1:11-23)

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When I moved to Wisconsin more than a decade ago, I knew the Green Bay Packers had a storied history and a national reputation. What I didn't know was the enormous power the Packers hold in the culture of this state. I've since learned that:

- The best time to go shopping is during a Packers game. Stores and malls throughout Wisconsin are completely empty.
- Lambeau Field, the Packers' stadium in Green Bay, is one of the top destinations for Wisconsin weddings (more than 100 this year).
- There is a 45-year waiting list for season tickets. Wisconsin families pass down their tickets from one generation to the next.
- Wisconsin pastors, when planning their church's fall schedule, sit down with the Packers' schedule to make sure all church activities (including worship) don't conflict with a game.
- When the Packers won the Super Bowl in 2010, all public schools surrounding Green Bay were closed so that students could travel to the stadium and welcome home their triumphant team.
- Stadium expansions are partially funded through the public sale of "Packers Stock," \$250 stock certificates that include voting rights--but the redemption price is minimal, no dividends are ever paid, and the stock cannot appreciate in value. For the 2012 expansion, \$67 million was raised during the 12-week stock sale that occurred online. Today there are more than 360,000 shareholders of Packers stock. Each can claim the title "NFL team owner."

- On "green and gold Fridays" before home games, tens of thousands of children throughout the state wear Packers jerseys to school.

It wasn't until I heard a network sportscaster refer to Lambeau Field as the "cathedral in Green Bay" that I realized there was more going on here than mere team loyalty. Our state's fervent passion for and deep commitment to the Green Bay Packers border on a form of civil religion. This football franchise, along with the entire NFL, has become a cultural god.

The enthronement hymn in Ephesians 1 is an invitation to Paul's gentile readers to embrace and praise the majesty of God who is "the Father of glory," the one who sits at God's "right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named." This eschatological vision of the lordship of Christ has practical consequences for Paul: no human power or authority stands above it, and all are subject to divine judgment, for God "has put all things under his feet." This includes professional football.

Recently I watched *Concussion*, a movie about Bennet Omalu, the Nigerian-born pathologist who discovered chronic traumatic encephalopathy--the buildup of protein deposits in the brain caused by repeated blows to the head. In an early scene in the movie, Omalu (played by Will Smith) warns his colleagues about the physical dangers of football. "God did not intend for us to play football," he says.

In the movie another doctor tells Omalu to leave God out of his research. But Omalu, a devout Roman Catholic, knows that there are limits to the human body that God created, limits to what it can endure. In the relentless pursuit of athletic perfection, not to mention the temptations of fame and fortune, many thousands of football players have put their lives at risk, as we are now discovering. *Concussion* is about Dr. Omalu's tenacious Christian calling to challenge one of our nation's most cherished and powerful cultural gods. That tenacious calling will ultimately force football to become a much safer sport.

On this All Saints Sunday we remember the extraordinary witness of so many Christians through the centuries. The Nigerian pathologist who had the courage and tenacity to place professional football under God's feet and subject to God's judgment leads me to add Dr. Bennet Omalu to that list of saints.