

Rites of spring ring in 'Church of Baseball' Sermon on the Mound: Sermon on the Mound

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Megachurch pastor Rick Warren stood on the mound at Angel Stadium in Anaheim, California, on Easter Sunday and delivered his pitch.

"Baseball is a game of numbers in which every player falls short of perfection," said the best-selling author and evangelical powerhouse. "Similarly, in life, while we have all had a few hits or scored a few runs, we strike out a lot." Whether we're superstars or benchwarmers, God's our biggest fan, Warren concluded.

To the 50,000 people who watched Warren's well-advertised "Sermon on the Mound," the striking similarities between baseball and religious life were clear as a summer Sunday. But as a sprint around the bases shows, Warren is just one of a number of preachers, scholars, players and fans who hears echoes of the ethereal when the umpire cries "Play ball!"

To some, baseball, which F. Scott Fitzgerald famously called "the faith of 50 million people," is revered as a religion in itself. It follows a seasonal calendar—begun this year on Easter Sunday – and builds toward a crowning moment. Its players perform priestly rituals, its history abounds with tales of mythic heroes, and its fans study and argue arcana with the intensity of Talmudic scholars.

"Like a church, with its orthodoxy and heresies, its canonical myths and professions of faith, its rites of communion and excommunication, baseball appears in these terms as the functional religion of America," writes religion scholar David Chidester of the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

Or, as Annie Savoy poetically puts it in the 1988 film *Bull Durham*, "The only church that feeds the soul, day in and day out, is the church of baseball." The well-known theologian Stanley Hauerwas, a fellow fan of the Durham Bulls, has written that

“there are few things better that Christians can do in and for America than play and watch baseball.”

Shaun Casey, an ethicist at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, isn’t willing to go that far. But he does teach a class called “Church of Baseball” at Wesley.

During the weeklong class, students go to a baseball game, learn how to keep score and read a box score. In addition, they read Robert Bellah’s famous essay on America’s civil religion, watch Ken Burns’s magisterial documentary on baseball, and learn about Jackie Robinson’s role in integration as the first black player in the major leagues and how the St. Louis Cardinals beat the vaunted New York Yankees in 1964 by building a team that blended black and white players.

The point of the class, Casey says, besides convincing students of the “divine blessedness” of the Boston Red Sox and St. Louis Cardinals, is to help seminarians think theologically about pop culture.

“It’s my belief that pastors ought to be able to interpret pop culture to their congregations,” Casey said, adding that ministers who know their way around a baseball diamond are equipped to “connect to the community and empower the people within their congregation to witness to the world.”

Like Casey, Rabbi Rebecca Alpert says baseball—particularly the integration of black players in the late 1940s and the 1950s—can teach believers a thing or two about justice and fairness and how to live in a pluralistic community.

Alpert, who teaches at Temple University in Philadelphia, said she remembers sitting with her mother in the stands at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn and watching Jackie Robinson’s Dod gers. “She would say, ‘This is the team that integrated baseball,’” making it clear which side to root for, Alpert recalls.

Alpert, who was among the first generation of female rabbis in the U.S., says she sees a connection between those summer days and her current work, which includes a forthcoming book on how Jews helped black baseball players get to the major leagues.

Other scholars say the national pastime is an integral part of the country’s civil religion—the secular events and places that Americans invest with spiritual significance.

Baseball's civil rituals include having the president throw out the first pitch, as President Obama did in Washington on April 5, and singing the national anthem before games, which began during World War II. In recent seasons, some clubs have invited performers to sing "God Bless America" in the seventh inning.

William Herzog II, vice president for academic affairs at Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, coedited a book about baseball and religion called *The Faith of 50 Million*, which explores the sacred status of baseball in American culture.

Baseball is just a game, Herzog said. It doesn't feed the hungry, or care for the sick, or settle disputes between warring nations. And yet, he says, there is something ineffably stirring and nearly transcendent about sitting in Boston's Fenway Park and seeing the outfield where great players once roamed—the "great cloud of witnesses," or "communion of saints," if you will.

"There are a lot of things about baseball that tug at the heart strings," Herzog said. "You don't see that with any other sport." —*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*