

**St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church**  
2368 Eggert Road, Tonawanda, NY 831-1777

## **“Widen Home Plate!”**

**The Rev. Fr. Richard Molison, Preacher**

Sat. – Sun.; Nov. 19-20, 2016

Feast of Christ the King

Just a few weeks ago, this nation witnessed one of the greatest comebacks in sports history the likes of which we may not see again for many, many years. After a 108-year drought, the Chicago Cubs won the World Series in a very exciting 7<sup>th</sup> game.

Just a week ago, Dan Scully and I were engaged in a wonderful discussion about the recent presidential election and that discussion evolved into a sports story I had just read. Dan shared that he was drafted into the Cincinnati Reds' farm club when just a high school junior. He was a pitcher and when I told him of the title of the story, his comment was something to the effect, “I wish that was done for me!” You see, the title of the story is “Widen Home Plate!” which is a personal account of author Chris Sperry's attendance at a baseball coaches' convention. I believe the message of this story is pertinent to this Sunday being “Christ the King” Sunday, and wish to share it with you.

Chris Sperry writes: “In Nashville, Tennessee, during the first week of January, 1996, more than 4,000 baseball coaches descended upon the Opryland Hotel for the 52<sup>nd</sup> annual American Baseball Coaches Association convention.

“While I waited in line to register with the hotel staff, I heard other more veteran coaches rumbling about the line-up of speakers scheduled to present during the weekend. One name in particular kept resurfacing, always with the same sentiment. “John Scolinos is here? Oh man, worth every penny of my airfare.”

“Who in the world is John Scolinos?” I wondered. No, matter, I was just happy to be there.

In 1996, Coach Scolinos was 78-years old and five years retired from college coaching career that began in 1948. He shuffled to the stage to an impressive standing ovation, wearing dark

polyester pants, a light blue shirt, and a string around his neck from which home plate hung – a full sized, stark white home plate! Seriously, I wondered who in the world is this guy?

After speaking for twenty-five minutes, not once mentioning the prop hanging around his neck, Coach Scolinos appeared to notice the snickering among some of the coaches. Even those who knew Coach Scolinos had to wonder exactly where he was going with this, or if he had simply forgotten about the home plate since he had gotten on stage. Then, finally...

“You are probably wondering why I am wearing home plate around my neck. Or, maybe you think I escaped from the state hospital, he said, his voice growing irascible. I laughed along with the others in acknowledgement of the possibility. “No,” he continued, “I may be old, but I am not crazy. The reason I stand before you today is to share with you baseball people what I have learned in my life, what I have learned about home plate in my 78 years.”

Several hands went up when Scolinos asked how many Little league coaches were in the room. “Do you know how wide home plate is in Little league?” After a pause, someone offered, “Seventeen inches?”, more of a question than an answer.

“That’s right!” responded Coach Scolinos. “How about in Babe Ruth’s day? Any Babe Ruth coaches in the house?”

Another long pause... “Seventeen inches?” came a guess from another reluctant coach.

That’s right,” said Scolinos. “Now, how many high school coaches do we have here in this room? Hundreds of hands shot up. “How wide is home plate in high school baseball?” “Seventeen inches,” they said, sounding more confident.

“You are right!” Scolinos barked. And you college coaches, how wide is home plate in college?” “Seventeen inches!” we said in unison.

Any minor-league coaches here? How wide is home plate in pro-ball? “Seventeen inches!” “And in the major leagues, how wide is home plate?” “Seventeen inches!”

“S-E-V-E-N-T-E-E-N I-N-C-H-E-S!” Scolinos confirmed, his voice bellowing off the walls. “And what do they do with a big-league pitcher who cannot throw the ball over those seventeen inches?” There was a long pause. “They send him to Pocatello!” he hollered, drawing a raucous laughter. (Pocatello is a small village in Idaho, a Native American Indian reservation is nearby. In other words, the underperforming pitcher is sent to the reservation.)

Coach Scolinos continued, “What they do **not** do is this: They do not say, ‘Ah, that’s okay, Jimmy. You can’t hit a seventeen-inch target? We will make it eighteen inches, or even

nineteen inches. We will make it twenty inches so you will have a better chance of hitting it. If you can't hit that, let us know so that we can make it wider still, say twenty-five inches?"

Pause....

Coach Scolinos continues, "Coaches...."

Pause....

"... What do we do when our best player shows up late to practice? When team rules forbid facial hair and a guy shows up unshaven? What if he gets caught drinking? Do we hold him accountable? Or do we change the rules to fit him? Do we widen home plate?"

The chuckles gradually faded as four thousand coaches grew quiet, the fog lifting as the old coach's message began to unfold. He turned the plate forward to himself and, using a Sharpie marker, began to draw something. When he turned it toward the crowd of coaches, point up, a house was revealed, complete with a freshly drawn door and two windows. Coach Scolinos continues, "This is the problem in our homes today. With our marriages, with the way we parent our kids. With our discipline. We do not teach accountability to our kids, and there is no consequence for failing to meet standards. Instead, we widen the plate!"

Pause...

Then, to the point at the top of the house, he added a small American flag. "This is the problem in our schools today. The quality of our education is going downhill fast and teachers have been stripped of the tools they need to be successful, and to educate and discipline our young people. We are allowing others to widen the home plate! Where is that getting us?"

Silence... Coach Scolinos erased the flag and replaced it with a cross. "And this is the problem in the Church, where powerful people in positions of authority have taken advantage of young children, only to have such an atrocity swept under the rug for years. Our church leaders are widening home plate for themselves. And we allow it!" (St. Bart's has not only seen this, but has experienced this as well.)

Chris Sperry then comments, "I was amazed. At a baseball convention where I expected to learn something about curveballs and bunting, and how to run better practices, I learned something far more valuable from an old man with home plate strung around his neck. I learned something about life, about myself, about my own weakness, and about responsibilities as a leader. I need to hold myself and others accountable to that which I knew to be right, lest our families, our faith, and our society continue down an undesirable path."

“If I am blessed,” Coach Scolinos concluded, “you will remember one thing from this old coach today. It is this: If we fail to hold ourselves to a high standard, a standard of what we know to be right, if we fail to hold our spouses and our children to the same standards; if we are unwilling or unable to provide a consequence when they do not meet the standards; and if your schools and churches and our government fail to hold themselves accountable to those they serve, there is but one thing to look forward to...”

With that, the coach held home plate in front of his chest, turned it around, and revealed its dark **black** side. “...dark days ahead,” he quietly stated.

Chris Sperry writes: Coach Scolinos died in 2009 at the age of 91, but not before touching the lives of hundreds of players and coaches, including mine. His message was clear: “Coaches, keep your players – no matter how good they are – your own children, your churches, your government, and most of all, keep yourself at seventeen inches.”

When I finished reading this story for the first time, and it happened again as I typed the last word of it or you, I sat back in my chair with “glory” bumps the size of the Rocky Mountains running up and down my back.

Standards, accountability, consequence are the three interwoven themes of the story just read. Today is “Christ the King Sunday,” which marks the end of a liturgical year. Next week is the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of a new liturgical year. Today also means that there are only four more Sundays until Christmas. Speaking of Christmas, many of our Christmas Carols make reference to Christ as King: “Old Little Town of Bethlehem;” “Of the Father’s Love Begotten;” “O Come All Ye Faithful;” “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” just to name a few.

Yahweh God’s kingship can be traced all the way back to books of the Pentateuch, the Books of Moses, to Moses’ second book, Exodus, 15:18. From the very beginning of the gospels, the royal kingship of Jesus is present: The visit of the three kings searching for the new born king of the Jews; Gabriel’s declaration to Mary announcing that she will give birth to the descendent of the throne of David; Jesus rides into Jerusalem to the cries of “Blessed is the King who comes in the Name of the Lord; and Pilot’s accusation that Jesus is King of the Jews.

Ever since we have been kids, all of us have heard many wonderful stories about kings. Hearing those great stories helped shape our understanding of kings. One understanding may be that a king is an absolute ruler of a region of land, a kingdom, in which all others are subject to him in that they are to serve him. In many of these stories that we heard as children, what was the penalty for not serving the king: either banishment from the kingdom or death. Jesus our King, stated that not to serve him results in what: banishment from His kingdom and eternal death. Those stories from our childhood have much to teach us, if we would only but make the connection.

Jesus is King, head above all. There is no greater other! At the command of His Father, Jesus created the universe, the earth in which we live, and created us. For our own welfare, Jesus set before us standards, expectations, of our behavior. If we keep His standards of behavior, we will enjoy eternal life. If we choose to ignore them, the consequence is eternal death. Man's misbehavior became so bad that Jesus found it necessary to come to us, that which we now celebrate as Christmas, and He came for only one reason, Good Friday and Easter. Mankind attempted to widen home plate. Jesus came to reset it. Not one change in His Word is acceptable.

Our basic understanding of a king is that of a sole ruler that establishes and maintains order throughout the kingdom. At the creation, God established his kingdom here on earth. Standards of behavior were set to provide order and justice. It is important to understand that the primary element in God's kingship is love. Jesus came not only as a king, but also as a loving shepherd. God sets the standards with love and concern for the welfare of His creation. This is quite evident in the life of Jesus who not only set expectations of behavior, but did so as a loving shepherd who truly cares for His flock. Through Jesus' reign of true justice and love, His flock will find safety and prosperity.

Jesus is King. Jesus has absolute and total control. Jesus has absolute authority. As home plate at all levels of baseball is the same size, Jesus has set the unmovable bar, set permanent paradigms and perimeters under which all of us are to serve Him. And we, being subjects to the living King, are His servants. Those who do not serve as set out in His commandments, will be judged. Accountability and consequences **are** meted out. God's home plate will not be widened to accommodate our human desires. This point is made quite clear in the account given in Matthew 25, when Jesus, sitting on His glorious throne, comes again to judge. We will be held accountable. We will experience consequences. Those who serve as commanded are rewarded.

Chris Sperry closed his remarks with a summary of Coach Scolinos' message with the directive to keep players, to keep our children, our churches, our government and most of all keep ourselves at seventeen inches. Human nature, being what it is, that goal is not accomplished easily. It takes spiritual discipline. From Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 11, we read: **All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.**

From the Old Testament, we learn that Joshua fought for a long time with the kings. We may come away from our reading of this war that it was a short one, but it lasted some seven years. There must have been times when Joshua felt like turning around to go back. However, he clung to Yahweh God's Word, persevered and endured. The same can be said for our spiritual battle. We, too, must persevere and keep fighting until Christ's return. C. H. Spurgeon wrote,

“By perseverance the snail reached the Ark.” Paul wrote in his second letter to Timothy, chapter two, verse 15: **Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.** We persevere because there is a prize waiting for us at the end of the race. We can persevere because God, through Jesus Christ, has given us the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to persevere without a need or desire to widen home plate. Just do what is expected by Jesus.

Oh, and by the way, how wide is home plate?