

From Matthew's Gospel: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Tonight is the Super Bowl. They say this could be the highest-scoring Super Bowl ever. With that in mind, I want to offer you a sports metaphor that relates well to understanding our gospel today: *breaking records*. It is always amazing to think, each time a world record or Olympic record is broken how no one had ever gone that fast or performed so well. Up until then, a standard was set that no one could beat... until of course it is beaten. And people remark how that was the longest or fastest and will probably never be broken... until of course it is.

There is a reason for this. It is called the *self-efficacy theory*. The self-efficacy theory suggests that people are able to achieve something because they know exactly what they have to do to surpass or overcome. That's why a field goal kicker practices kicking 60-yard field goals, because until now the record is 59. That's why Olympic records fall, because each record breaker knows exactly what he or she has to do in order to become the fastest

or best. Most see it as an impossible goal. They see it as an opportunity to set a new record. *Self-efficacy theory*.

Our gospel reading ends today with a teaching of Jesus early in his ministry, one that we might think of like a super bowl record or an Olympic standard: *Unless your faith exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven*. I would like to invite you to hear those words today in light of the self-efficacy theory, not as an impossible standard, but how it is a record we ought to beat.

You'll recognize this teaching as a part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus began with the Beatitudes—helping the world to see how differently he defined blessing and God's presence among us. And then he said to the crowd that that they were the salt of the earth, which in their world would have been one of the highest compliments to be paid, literally, to be paid. Not only did salt do the things we know it to do, it was so valuable that you got paid in it. That is where the word *salary* comes from, being paid in salt. Then he called them the light of the

world, and he reminded them that the essence of God was in them and ought to radiate from them.

They were God's red hot chili peppers. They were God's fireworks. As he said this, I can imagine they must have thought how wonderful following Jesus was going to be. No breaking world records, just being blessed in difficult circumstances, being those who give life to the world.

Then, almost like a dramatic scene from the Olympics, Jesus steps up and raises the bar a little higher. Like a moment in football legend, Jesus takes a long field goal and moves the ball back five more yards. *Unless your righteousness exceeds the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Scribes were the leaders of the synagogues, religious professionals, responsible for teaching Scriptures in worship, like pastors. And though they are sometimes a point of criticism in the gospels, I suspect many of them were people of deep faith and strong character who had devoted their lives to caring for others spiritually.

And there were the Pharisees. Pharisee usually has a negative connotation, though the name just means *pious*. They were committed to a life of devotion and of keeping rules. We might think of them like monks and nuns. And that is why, when people heard that their faith had to surpass this, they may have thought it was a record that would never be broken.

You and I know, though, that there is an ongoing tension between Jesus and some of the scribes and Pharisees. (It is not with all of them. Some who followed Jesus were Pharisees, like Nicodemus. And Matthew, whose gospel records these sayings, was probably a scribe himself.) But it is pretty clear that Jesus wasn't very impressed with this type of religiosity, with their approach to faith, because sometimes it seemed a bit self-righteous and neglected the needs of others. *Self-righteousness, neglecting the needs of others.* I suspect those were the things Jesus had in mind as he raised the bar that day.

In fairness, this raising of the bar didn't originate with

esus. The Prophets had urged people again and again to transcend the Law; not to be constrained by the Law but to fulfill it. Our Old Testament reading today echoes this sentiment. Isaiah decries those in his day who would rather keep just the simple constraints of the Law. He says that they keep the fasts of God only so others will notice them, and that they are so busy with themselves and their own righteousness, that they fail to see the need around them. So Isaiah suggests instead that a righteousness acceptable to God, is to fight injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share bread with the hungry, to cover the naked, to give shelter to those who were homeless. And if Isaiah's words sound familiar to us, it is because Jesus echoed them again and again.

It occurs to me that Jesus recognized the difference between religion that was self-serving and faith that transformed and transcended life. He challenged people to recognize places where following the Law meant neglecting to do good or to heal and to help others to find wholeness. And that is why he said that, even though there were myriad examples of religious rule-following

that are "good enough," that should never be our goal. Good enough is not the gospel. He raised the bar: let your faith exceed what the rules require.

Be the salt of the earth. Be the light of the world. If the self-efficacy theory is true, the bar is always raised.

Here is one example. The Rev'd Mr. William Meade, was Rector of Christ Church in Alexandria, Virginia, from 1811 until 1813. In the early years of our country, he grew convinced that slavery was contrary to the Gospel. He wondered how Christians who called freedom something God-given could think that others didn't deserve the same benefit. In Virginia, where slavery was a way of life and would be for years, his parishioners defended their views with Scripture, as ordained by God and defended by the Bible. So when preaching and teaching didn't work, he freed his own slaves and encouraged them to do the same. I don't know if any of them did. I noticed that he was only rector for two years, so I have my doubts! But I would say that his was a faith that exceeded the scribes and Pharisees.

Another is a man named Martin Niemoeller. Some of you will remember his most famous quote, how when they came for the communists and trade unionists and Jews, he didn't speak out because he wasn't any of those. Then they came for him and there was no one left to speak for him. I have seen that quote lately, which is... complicated. Niemoeller was a German pastor (a scribe) in the years leading up to WWII and notably, he was an early supporter of Adolf Hitler. You see, he was in the Imperial Navy during WWI and thought Hitler promised to bring back the strength and self-reliance that Germany once had. He recognized a growing trend of atheism and a loss of values in society. He believed ironically that Hitler could make Germany be more Christian.

As time passed, of course, he changed his mind. Soon, he regretted being apathetic. He joined Bonhoeffer in a group called the Confessing Church to oppose the NAZIs.

The last sermon that Niemoeller preached before spending eight years in a Concentration Camp, he

preached on our Gospel reading today. He said in his sermon that Christianity needed desperately to return to being salt of the earth and light to the world, to be life-giving and never self-serving. He lamented how the Christian faith in their midst had become one of fear and calling people undesirable, and how the Christianity of his time was not in keeping with the gospel. He said, they must learn again to be salt and light.

He gets at something that I think is important for us: the gospel will never sound like a political platform. If it sounds like DNC or RNC talking points, it probably isn't the gospel. No, the gospel challenges us and our assumptions in life and pushes us beyond all of that to be what Jesus once called salt and light. We will find overlap, to be sure, but the gospel pushes us beyond the limits of human love to a love that is beyond what humanity usually attains. It pushes us beyond human hope that is finite, to a hope that lives beyond the grave.

We could say it this way: The Olympic record holders of the gospel have never been those who found the gospel

to be convenient or simple. They always knew that records must be broken and faith must be transcended. Perhaps we could call that the Gospel-efficacy theory, how the Olympic record holders of faith are those who strive to go beyond convention, truly to be salt and light.

We follow in the holy footsteps of those who have raised the bar, inch by inch, as the years have gone by. We could look at them and doubt that we will ever do so well. Or perhaps we could see it as the Gospel-efficacy challenge that Jesus entrusted to each of us: how the bar is raised, how there is faith that transcends religion, and how we ought to see that as an opportunity to move beyond.

Watch tonight as records are set, by Patriots or Falcons. Watch for 60 yard field goals or something else. And as records are broken, remember the Gospel- efficacy theory, how yours is meant to be a faith that goes above and beyond.