

SERMON SERIES: "World Series of Stewardship"
SERMON TITLE: "Increase Runners Batted In: Encourage Others"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 21, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Picture this. It's the middle of the bottom of the ninth inning. Both teams have had trouble getting hits off the pitchers, and most of the innings of the game came up goose eggs. The crowd was getting sleepy from lack of action, but after singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," they've livened up and are eager for some action. But at this late stage of the game, your team is still two points behind, and you're the player just now stepping into the batter's box. The bases are loaded; your teammates have already done their best to get themselves onto first, second, and third bases; and now they're counting on you. The pitcher is winding up, and the high-speed ball is coming toward you. Will you bunt? Hit a line drive into the distant outfield? Smack a grounder between the bases? Clobber it over the fence? Whatever you do, you can't let the inning end without a score. Your team needs a morale boost. They need some encouragement. The pressure is on to increase RBIs, runners batted in.

I think that's what the Apostle Paul was getting at in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 8, verses 1-15. As we continue our World Series stewardship drive, let's consider this scripture and how we can "Increase Runners Batted In" as we "Encourage Others."

1—THE BIBLICAL SITUATION

The biblical situation was like this. A decade or two after Jesus' death and resurrection, a core group of Christians remained in Jerusalem. Many other Christians had migrated throughout the Mediterranean region, and the Apostle Paul and other missionaries had increased the numbers of believers among the Gentiles. According to the Book of Acts (11:28-29) and the writings of a first-century historian named Josephus, there was a famine in Judea during the reign of Emperor Claudius.

That would have left the Christians still living in Jerusalem in a situation of deprivation. So, the Apostle Paul requested that the Mediterranean churches like Corinth collect funds to be taken to the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem.

The scripture that we read last week from First Corinthians 16 spoke about this collection. That was Paul's first request that the Christians at Corinth strategize about how they would save up their money. As you may recall, Paul told them they should earn an income, make regular giving a priority, and give proportionately to their income. That way, the funds would be ready when Paul arrived to take them to Jerusalem.

Now, in this second letter, Paul is writing again about this collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. To encourage the Corinthians to keep up their contributions to this cause, Paul writes to them about the positive example of the Christians in Macedonia. Even though the Macedonians had suffered "a severe ordeal of affliction" and "extreme poverty" themselves, the Macedonian Christians were coming through with "a wealth of generosity," giving "even beyond their means" and "begging . . . earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry" of providing financial donations "to the saints." To put this in the language of our baseball theme, Paul was calling on the Corinthians to do what they could to help out their teammates. He was asking them to increase runners batted in.

2—DISASTER RELIEF TODAY

This first-century call for Christians to help the poor who were suffering from famine sounds like our United Methodist system today of making donations to UMCOR—the United Methodist Committee on Relief. You probably remember that Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in September 2017. One year later, that U.S. territory is still trying to restore electricity and put roofs on houses. In fact, in early November, I'm going to Puerto Rico with a United Methodist Volunteer in Mission team to help work on such projects for a week. And you'll be glad to learn that our collective donations through UMCOR have allowed our denomination to provide \$20 million to the recovery effort there.

Twenty million dollars may be just a small drop in the big bucket of what Puerto Rico needs, but when our United Methodist churches send that money to the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico, and those church leaders then organize recovery projects and dispense those funds in ways that seem best to them, they receive enormous amounts of encouragement and empowerment. The Methodists of Puerto Rico are thus enabled to be a great source of good in their communities and all across their commonwealth.

The same thing has been happening in the Southeastern United States. Over the past year, UMCOR has sent millions of dollars to the southern states to help with relief and recovery from last year's hurricanes. Now, more money is on the way for the initial clean up after Hurricanes Florence and Matthew, and even more will be sent later on, as specific recovery projects are planned.

We may think of such donations to disaster relief as that extra amount that we give on top of our regular giving, or in addition to our tithes and pledges. And it's great and wonderful whenever we are inspired and able to give extra! But I want you to know that the United Methodist Committee on Relief exists at all because our United Methodist denomination exists. And our United Methodist denomination exists because all our local churches exist in communities all across the United States and in many other countries of the world. Our First United Methodist Church, right here in Marriott-Slaterville, is an important part of that great big connection, and our local church exists because all of you and I make our pledges and contribute our tithes and offerings to make all this ministry possible.

It's important for you to know this. When you put money in our First UMC offering plates or when you sign up to have electronic transfers from your bank account, you are helping to bring relief to hungry people. You are offering clean water to those who are thirsty. You are assisting in mucking out mud and removing flood-damaged carpets and drywall. You are lending a hand with a Volunteer in Mission team so they can put a tarp or a new roof over someone's house. You are allowing a pastor to assist a needy family in his or her church. And, whatever your sacrifice to give that amount of money,

you are helping to alleviate the suffering of others. You are offering a word and a deed of Christian hope. You are encouraging others.

3—INCREASE RUNNERS BATTED IN

To put all this in terms of baseball, our goal as Christians is to increase RBIs, runners batted in. Ideally, we would hit the ball over the fence and give plenty of time for ourselves and others to run the bases. But even if we don't hit the ball that powerfully, maybe we can hit the ball in some other way that allows a runner or two to make it home. Even if we have to sacrifice our own score, it's good for us to play in a way that benefits the other players and, thus, the whole team.

When I think about our First UMC team, increasing runners batted in means providing Sunday School curriculum and teachers for our children, and youth ministry for our teenagers, so they can grow up to profess Christian faith. Increasing runners batted in means paying salaries for our musicians who help us worship and even for the pastor, who preaches the gospel of forgiveness, invites belief in God, and assists church members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. Increasing runners batted in means paying for the air conditioning in the summer and heat in the winter, so people will feel comfortable and welcome in worship and adult classes and small groups. Increasing runners batted in means providing funds for the mortgage on this beautiful and inspiring house of God. Increasing runners batted in means making pledges sufficient to employ an office manager, so we can maintain our team roster and manage all the details of our organization. Increasing runners batted in includes supporting our church financially so this building can continue providing meeting space for the life-nurturing programs of Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, yoga, mothers with babies, and musical groups. Increasing runners batted in always means generously providing a community of grace and hope for those who are hurting in their bodies or their spirits and yearning for the abundant life that God offers. Increasing runners batted in also means providing the inspiration and structures to assist all of you in the important ministries you do out there every day in your jobs, in your families, in your neighborhoods, and in the community.

4—KATHY & KAYLAJUNE

In case you haven't gotten acquainted, I want to introduce you to Kathy Riddlespurger. When I think of increasing runners batted in, I think of Kathy. Kathy is a licensed practical nurse at Washington Terrace Care Center. Working in a nursing home is hard work—on your feet, bending and lifting, getting into the messiness of life, dealing with people who don't always have a happy attitude, and very long shifts. Somehow, through it all, Kathy maintains a positive spirit that encourages those frail elderly and disabled residents.

Kathy also encourages her seven-year old granddaughter Kaylajune. Due to the dysfunction of Kaylajune's parents, Kathy made the decision to step up as legal guardian. Now that parental rights have been terminated, Kathy will be legally adopting Kaylajune on November 6. That's a huge celebration. And it's a huge cost and responsibility for a woman who hasn't had an easy life herself and who isn't young anymore. But it's a decision made out of love. Kathy has committed herself to improving Kaylajune's chances of success in rounding the bases of life.

In large part, that's why Kathy and Kaylajune came here to First United Methodist Church a year ago and have hardly missed a Sunday since. Even when her nursing home boss pressured her to work on Sundays, Kathy resisted as much as she possibly could because she values the spiritual lift and Christian education that she and Kaylajune gain when they come here. Members of the church like Tim and Kim Stenner and Linda Gates have also stepped up as designated childcare providers sometimes, and Kathy so appreciates how they have helped her to never miss work.

First United Methodist Church has been an invaluable team for Kathy and Kaylajune. With baptism and membership, they've been doing their part to get on base. And now the rest of us can do our part too in keeping this church alive and strong through our financial contributions and pledges for 2019. For all those persons already here or yet to join our team, this is how we increase runners batted in; we encourage others.

CONCLUSION

As I was working on this sermon throughout this past week, the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Milwaukee Brewers were slugging their way through a seven-game series. Last night, the Dodgers dominated and earned themselves a spot in The World Series. But, in game six on Friday, the Brewers came out on top, largely thanks to a first baseman and strong-hitter whose name is spelled like Jesus. The savior of that game was Jesus (hay-soose) Aguilar from Venezuela. Not only did he tally three hits and two runs himself, but he also increased his team's score with three other runners batted in.

In our church's World Series of Stewardship, that's what we need. We need players who are doing their part not only to increase their own faith but also encouraging faith in others. We can do this by supporting our church financially. In the next few days, you'll receive a letter from the church with a pledge card for 2019. Please think and pray carefully before you fill out your card. Then bring it with you to church next Sunday, October 28, so we can consecrate our pledges to God. Let's increase runners batted in; let's encourage others.