

Right or Rivalry?

Jonah 3:1-4:1

It's been said the world loves to hate a villain. I suppose that's true, given what's happened this past week to the New England Patriots and, in particular, to Coach Bill Belichick and Tom Brady. Here we are a week away from the Super Bowl and the only game in town for our local team is "deflategate." Honestly, according to Patriot-haters in the media, your head would have to be stuck in a snowbank to miss the biggest scandal *in the history of the world* (or at least the *history of the NFL*; okay, so it's not the worst thing to *ever* happen in the NFL, but at least it's the most atrocious crime in football over the past year; no, Ray Rice did that; okay, it's the biggest hullabaloo in professional football since...err...ah ...well, last Monday)! Yadda, yadda, yadda, if you know what I mean.

To summarize the situation, eleven out of twelve footballs used by the Patriots in last week's blowout win over the Indianapolis Colts in the AFC Championship game were softer than the rules allowed for, meaning, someone was letting the air out of the pigskin and, consequently, of the Patriots' hopes of reaching the Super Bowl without having the success of their season being reduced to spoiled sports. Poor Roger Goodell, the \$50 million-a-year commissioner of this multi-billion "nonprofit" league¹, who has been feeling the heat all season long, now can't even enjoy the NFL's annual two-week party in the Arizona desert. He has to make a Solomon-like ruling without fumbling the ball, even though he'd prefer to pass on it. Some claim it's a minor infraction that had no bearing on the

¹ The NFL benefits from federal tax exemptions.

outcome of the game, while others are certain that Belichick and Brady will be the “O.J. Simpson” of the flatscreen era. However this gets resolved, it likely ensures that the biblical warning, “be sure your sin will find you out,” will now be permanently engraved in the Hall of Shame at Gillette Stadium!

Regardless of what happened, it’s hard to imagine that Belichick’s and Brady’s reputations will ever be redeemed in the eyes of those who are Patriot haters, even if they repent of their “wicked” ways and humbly prostrate themselves before the divine trinity of football (i.e., CBS, NBC, and Fox Sports). In fact, I would imagine these “sinister princes” of Kraft’s kingdom will simply embrace their villainy, since football fans love to demonize someone in order to stoke a rivalry. So why not the Patriots? Why shouldn’t New England be construed as the Darth Vader of the NFL? Someone has to be an evil nemesis and it sure isn’t going to be anyone on a last place team (that’s why the Red Sox are so loveable)!

The truth is, rivalry is born out of envy. What we’re seeing in all the hoopla surrounding the Patriots this week is part and parcel of competition and the emotions it stirs up in people when everything is on the line. If this all came out five months ago after a pre-season game, instead of right before the Super Bowl, most of here wouldn’t have heard a word about it. It’s usually the teams that seem invincible and hard to beat that you want to see fall.

Related to this is the self-righteousness inherent to hometown support. Part of being an ardent fan is being prejudiced for your side and bigoted against others. It’s tribal morality. What fan doesn’t defend their side as inherently noble and good, while archrivals are

evil, deceptive cheaters? Self-righteousness is the moral duty of hometown fans, for God is *always* supposed to be on *your* side!

When we see it in this light, we can recognize how much sports mimics life. What we see on and off the field is a fair representation of what we experience in our daily world. It's competitive, with winners and losers, where cheating is supposed to be against the rules, but still goes on all the time, even though a token few might get caught. As much as people scream about integrity, very few aren't willing to push the envelope to get ahead. People wouldn't cheat in school, on taxes, in business, or just about anywhere if it didn't pay some dividends. It may not be right, but as long as it's a part of getting the edge in a closely contested rivalry, it's suddenly more understandable and tolerable, especially when the accusations are directed against your side.

The benefits are clearly evident and the values amply exposed. Those who come out on top are lionized, even though many times they succeed through questionable means. Those who lose out we may feel sorry for, but typically the remedy for failure is for them to simply learn from and follow the example of winners, because beating the competition is how we measure a successful and worthwhile life.

Rivalry and competition are hard things not to be caught up in within the everyday world. Whether we are talking about sports or something else, much of the justification for doing wrong in any situation is based on how we view rivals. It becomes remarkably easy to cheat, deceive, deliberately harm an opponent, or act out in an otherwise immoral way when we objectify the opposition and turn rivals into formidable enemies.

This is how the process of demonization begins. Friendly rivals can turn into serious adversaries in a moment's notice. When adversaries morph into enemies, the reinforcement of malicious criticism and hateful bias results in demonization. An adversary comes to personify evil, which makes it easier then to cast oneself as virtuous in defending what is most valued. When this occurs, the blind spot grows and grows to where it becomes virtually impossible to see anything good about your enemy.

This, of course, helps to explain much of the hard-nosed partisanship we see in Washington and around the country, and it's also one of the discoveries about crimes of war. As we know, soldiers are intentionally trained to dehumanize the enemy in order to carry out their orders. That's how they survive on the battlefield and accept the horror of killing someone else. Part of the fallout with PTSD is that when soldiers see actual human beings—not objects—being killed, friend or enemy alike, they are often haunted and psychologically scarred by the sight. Some of that is because they are being forced to kill their conscience in the process about what is right and wrong even while they are carrying out a deadly assignment. In the fog of war, no one can claim the moral high road—everyone contributes to the evil and destruction.

A blurring of the lines between what was right or wrong was also Jonah's big problem. He had a huge blindspot when it came to the welfare of the people of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, the dominant power and enemy of Jonah's own people of Judah. Assyria swept through the region and took out Judah's main rival, that being the northern kingdom of Israel. One might think that the people of

Judah would rejoice over this. At first, that might have been the case; but with the political intrigue of the time, it became apparent that being the enemy of an enemy wasn't a safeguard from their own fate. Thus, it became clear the Assyrians were arch enemies of the Judeans in the south as well, who feared the same would befall them.

One might imagine Jonah would find little reason to care about or value the people of Nineveh. In all likelihood, he grew up with all the demonizing and prejudices characteristic of his place and times against the seemingly invincible Assyrians. *They're arrogant and powerful because they cheat! They're deceptive, oppressive, violent, and impossible to defeat as an evil power in the world! They are the minions of Satan!*

So with all of this "cold war" rhetoric, it must have seemed strange to Jonah to be urged by his conscience to go to Nineveh and appeal to the people to repent. Everyone else in Judah prayed for God to destroy them—why would Jonah feel God wanted them saved?

As we know the story, Jonah wasn't only reluctant to do this, but he ran away from his responsibility to challenge the stereotypes and hatred in the ongoing hostility. In doing so, his conscience haunted him and because he had refused God, it became a whale of a story! In the end, begrudgingly he went and, according to this fish tale, the Ninevites responded, repented, and even turned toward Judah's God.

As unlikely an outcome as this might seem to be, one would think Jonah then would have been delighted with this unexpected success, welcoming their positive response to his altar call. Why not? He had successfully turned an evil enemy into a world of new friends!

He should have been happier than a lark! Instead, he bitterly sulked. Why?

For me, this is the most intriguing part of the story. We are never told specifically, but he certainly gives evidence of a psychological and spiritual phenomenon. That is, by losing an enemy with no one to demonize, Jonah (and all of Judah) lost an important part of their identity, purpose, and significance. Without a rival in the competitive game of life, the Judeans no longer could view themselves through the lens of their prejudices against their opponent. No longer could they justify their stereotypes and caricatures of their adversaries. Their sense of righteousness, of being in the right—of being the noble, virtuous, and innocent victims of aggression, of being “good” in comparison to such an “evil” no longer held court; their belief in themselves as being in the right no longer was validated by their rival’s wrong.

In other words, the self-righteousness that feeds human rivalry was undone by the goodness that became apparent in their enemies’ change of heart. The demonized object of their hatred now became a sympathetic subject; those who were cast with contempt, now were human beings worthy of respect and mercy.

Furthermore, without the blindspot of anger clouding their judgment, reality seemed a bit different. Judah’s own questionable choices and conduct were now exposed for scrutiny, far more than when they were hidden behind the public veneer of self-righteous scorn. Jonah and Judah were no longer morally superior to the adversary whose evil had largely defined them.

What angered Jonah wasn't the repentance of the Ninevites; what made him sulk under the castor bean plant was the stark awareness that God doesn't hold prejudices or takes sides in the world of human rivalry. Jonah faced the fact that the repentance of his enemies now required Judah's own repentance in kind.

It's not surprising, of course, that this reckoning awareness was at the heart of Jesus' prophetic mission, and why he sensed his calling to be "the sign of Jonah." The hatred and prejudice between adversaries were no different in his day, except the Romans (not the Assyrians) played the role of the hated enemy and his people, like their ancestors, were just as complicit with evil.

That's how it always is; that's how people manipulate the record to bring others to their side. That's how history is written to validate bias. It happens everywhere. In a rivalry, *everyone cheats on the truth!*

This is precisely why Jesus took away the terms of rivalry, the justifications everyone uses to excuse their own immoral acts. Jesus made it quite clear that Jews weren't morally superior to Samaritans after all; Roman centurions (yes, the armed warriors of the oppressor) were not demons, they were ordinary human beings, worthy of love, with children and family in need of care and sympathy like anyone else. That's why Jesus healed the centurion's child, instead of rejoicing over her death.

In effect, Jesus re-humanized the enemies of Judea in order that his own people would repent from everything they were doing to contribute to the endless animosity, preventing justice and mercy being extended to all people, Jew and Gentile alike.

Honestly, in terms of rivalries and the demonization of enemies, our generation has to repent of the same. The sign of Jonah should make us all ponder, if not question, the motivations behind our beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and actions. In this partisan world, is what we say or do offered because it is the right thing to do or say, or is it only out of spite or animosity directed toward a rival we've come to despise? Are we too easily swept up into the distortions, half-truths, and outright lies that perpetuate prejudice—that not only dehumanize, but demonize, our adversaries, whoever and wherever they might be?

Is it really about being right, or is it only rivalry, that motivates and justifies what we say or do in a given situation? It's not always as clear as we think, and what we discover about ourselves may be even more revealing about reality than what we otherwise perceive it to be.

As Christians, how many times do we need to be reminded not to cast stones, or to be mindful of the log in our own eye before we criticize the sliver in our neighbors'? What do we think Jesus meant when he commanded us to love our enemies and to do good to those who harm us? What do we think his point was—spiritual wisdom was optional—limited only to our own convenience?

What do we do that is right? What is it we do only out of rivalry with another? Those are important questions. May we consider this message and discern the spiritual dynamics of contesting a rival before we conclude which side is, in fact, more honorable.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
25 January 2015