

“It’s Not Your Score – It’s Your Name”

They call it “March Madness”. It is the favorite time of year for basketball teams and basketball junkies, with the high school girls’ and boys’ tournaments, the college “big dance” ending with the “Final Four”, the national championship for men’s and women’s teams, the National Invitational Tournament played at Madison Square Garden, ending the season.

I had a little brush with “March Madness”. It was 54 years ago toward the end of March. Our Seminary choir was on an east coast tour, scheduled to sing in Providence, Rhode Island. The way things worked on the tour was that the Luther Leaguers (the high school youth group) from the host congregation would head up the publicity and meals and provide for housing. We were traveling in our bus into Providence when suddenly we were stopping, as there were mobs of people all over the highway. They were clapping and cheering, there were balloons and posters, a band was playing, people were jumping up and down, waving at us, blowing us kisses, as they surrounded our bus.

We thought, “Wow!” This Luther league has really gone all out! What a welcome!”

Our choir manager got off the bus to thank these folks for this fabulous welcome. After awhile he got back on the bus – laughing? It turned out that Providence College had won the NIT the night before, and the crowd thought we were the team returning to town. Well, it was a bit of a letdown, but a couple of days later we learned that the incident had made Paul Harvey News. But we had a story to tell our grandkids. “March Madness” is a wonderful time of year.

Of course, basic to the whole game of basketball is that you make more points than your opponent. Making points is central to the game.

Making points was probably in the back of the mind of Nicodemus as he made that clandestine call on Jesus that we read about in our Gospel lesson for today. Not points on the basketball floor, but points with God.

It was a commonly held belief that if you wanted to be close to God the Father you needed to score a lot of points. So you would offer sacrifices, say your prayers, give alms to the poor, and pay attention to the Commandments, especially as they were interpreted by the scribes and religious elite of the day – people like Nicodemus. The rules were all laid out – you had a guide to help you score points with God.

But it seems as if Nicodemus had become kind of rattled. This Jesus had come along and was shaking things up. He did not talk about scoring points, but rather about accepting an invitation for a closer walk with God.

Nicodemus decides to pay Jesus a call under the cover of darkness, perhaps because he was not quite ready to have the good old boys in his group know with whom he was drinking coffee in the middle of the night.

The Gospel lesson gives a short outline of the conversation. Maybe we can fill in a bit of how we think the conversation went – maybe something like this:

Early in the conversation, Jesus tries to steer Nicodemus away from the points scored concept as a way of being close to God, being in the Kingdom, making the cut. Jesus tells Nicodemus that it is basically not what you do, Nicodemus, but what God does. To be in the Kingdom, you need to be born from above. Born by God's action. Given new life by God. Born again.

Nicodemus has trouble getting this, gets confused by taking literally what Jesus is talking about, goes off into a sort of babbling about, can a person be able to enter into a mother's womb a second time, and experience being born a second time?

So Jesus tells Nicodemus to use his poetry app; that we are not talking biology here, but relationship – relationship offered by God just because he loves us and wants us close by him forever.

Nicodemus still does not seem to get it. So I think that Jesus then tells

Nicodemus that it is not your score that is in the Book of Life, but your name. Your Name.

Your name is there because of God's action, action from above – forgiving, accepting, proclaiming, "You are mine." I think Jesus went on to say to Nicodemus that it is all a gift. This life – life with God – is not something you can earn or deserve. It is a gift given "in spite of you", not because of you. It is something done to you, done for you. It is like being born all over again. It is all a gift.

I think Jesus kept trying to plant the concept of gift in the mind of Nicodemus. Not points. But gift.

Maybe Jesus said something like this, "Think about a child receiving a gift. When you give a little child a gift, the child does not stand there asking if they have scored enough points to really deserve this gift. No – they receive the gift and then go out to play." I think Jesus then said, "Nick, it is kind of like that with God coming to us. God says to you –

I love you

I forgive you

I want you to live with me forever."

Jesus want us to live in this promise and assurance too. We have as part of the Gospel lesson today the most well-known verse in the Bible. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have everlasting life."

God gives. Through Jesus, God gives himself to make things right between us and him and to make things right in the world. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God gives of himself, being victorious over sin and guilt, condemnation and hell, over all that would ultimately do us in, and he shares that victory with us.

I would like to think that Nicodemus thought and prayed about this conversation -- that he got it. Indeed, in the Gospel story of Good Friday, we read that Nicodemus was one of the two who removed Jesus from the cross and placed him in the grave. We don't hear any more about Nicodemus, but I think when he heard the news that Jesus was raised from the dead and is alive, I think he said -- "Yes!"

I was born on March 11, 1935

I was born again on September 15, 1935, when I was baptized.

I was born again this morning, March 14, 2015.

I will be born again tomorrow, March 15, 2015.

All God's action -- God forgiving and accepting me.

God comes to us each day, and says,

Remember it is not score that is written in the Book of Life -- it's your name.

I love you

I forgive you

I want you to be with me forever.

You are mine!

And we say --

Sounds good to me. I'll stake my life on your promises.

Thanks be to God. Amen.