



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

God love(s) the underdog

Isaiah 40.28–31

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*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
God does not faint or grow weary;
God's understanding is unsearchable. God gives power
to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

Hey listen, we already know God wants the Eagles to win. We don't need to spend a lot of time on that this morning. A simple search in the Bible concordance shows that eagles appear 33 times, and patriots exactly zero. Already the score is EAGLES 33 PATRIOTS 0.

We also know that God loves the underdog: David vs. Goliath, Joseph and his brothers, Moses vs. Pharaoh, Jesus vs. the Roman Empire, the Biblical list could go on and on. The Eagles are the underdogs today and have been in every game in the playoffs thus far. Just sayin'. So we don't need to spend a lot of time quibbling over who God is rooting for today.

But it has become a bit of a tradition here, not only to have Pork and Sauerkraut but to think about lessons we can learn from this game that dominates our culture, at least for the day.

So first, a primer on this particular game. It is the Philadelphia Eagles versus the New England Patriots. As is sometimes the case, this big game has an odds-on favorite,

2 the New England Patriots. Whether out of jealousy or just good, solid reasoning, the Patriots are commonly known as the Evil Empire of the NFL. The jealousy would spring from the outright dominance of this organization over the past couple of decades. Since 2001 the Patriots have won their division 16 of 18 seasons, this is their 8th trip to the Super Bowl in those years, and they've won 5 of those trips. Bear in mind there are 32 teams in the NFL. Simply put, they've been the best team in football, probably in professional sports over this span of time.

While some say evil empire, others just say genius. The Patriots have been masterful manipulators of their team roster, time and again making smart, unemotional personnel decisions. They also embody a team first, unwavering drive to win championships. If a player gets out of line, that player could easily find himself looking for a new team, regardless his level of talent.

This drive for excellence also has a dark side. The Patriots have a reputation as notorious cheaters. Whether it was accusations that they illegally filmed the Rams practice prior to that Super Bowl (can I get an amen Herb Hockley!), or whether it was Tom Brady deflating footballs to gain a grip advantage in the rain, or the documented instances of them bending the truth on the injury report, or illegally filming the opposition to steal signals, the Patriots do what it takes to win. They seem to follow the adage from that great sports thinker and philosopher Charles Barkley who once said: *If you ain't cheatin', you ain't trying.*

Steelers fans, of which you are many around here, are paying very close attention to this game. If the Patriots win, they will join the Steelers for most Super Bowl titles. I think Steelers fans will be rooting just as hard as Eagles fans today.

As always there are the fun subplots in the game and event. Justin Timberlake is performing at halftime. The last time he performed at halftime, the phrase “wardrobe malfunction” was invented. The game will be played in Minneapolis, MN where temperatures are expected to be 6 degrees today. Don’t worry, they’re playing inside.

Another good personal subplot is that of the quarterbacks. Patriots QB Tom Brady is known as the ultimate competitor and winner. He just won another league MVP last night at the age of 40 and he’s won 5 Super Bowl titles already and is on the cusp of a history-making sixth—many call him the greatest player of all time. This is the guy that seems to have it all: not only the professional success just like he has, he is handsome, has his own line of nutrition products that promise to defy time, he is literally married to a Brazilian Supermodel, Gisele Bundchen and they have a beautiful family.

The Eagles will be leaning on their backup quarterback, Nick Foles, who only recently became the starting quarterback after franchise QB Carson Wentz fell to a knee injury. Though Foles has had some success, even back in 2013 with the Eagles, Foles has bounced around the league, playing for 3 different teams, been injured, and had been benched several times for underperforming. He almost quit football at one point, before deciding to give it one more shot.

A lot of interesting things happening here. But there are also some lessons from all of this. You didn’t think I would spend the whole time talking about football alone did you?

LESSON #1—GROW WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED

Kevin Engle, Senior High Sunday School Teacher and big Eagles fan could give a TED Talk, maybe an entire semester course, on the merits of regional pride and rooting for the

4 team closest to you. While we know that in the New Testament Jesus and the early church expanded the tent and made room for everyone, the Hebrew Bible is nothing if not proud of its heritage. When I moved here to Pennsylvania, all of my rooting interests were with my homeland in Arizona. But there is something important about fully investing yourself in where you are.

Obviously, this is much larger than any team we root for. To grow where you are planted is to bring your faith to the here and now, no matter what the here and now is. We live into our present life-situation and focus on serving God within it. We have so much to learn from EYN. We should maintain our values and our perspective about the greater reality that is around us. We should be our best selves.

LESSON #2—KEEP PERSPECTIVE

If lesson #1 is to Grow where you are planted, Lesson #2 is Keep perspective. Don't become so narrow-minded, or rooted in regional pride that you become arrogant or lose your sense of perspective. In this case, I discovered a piece of information that was very important about the Eagles. Specifically, the Super Eagles. Do you know about the Super Eagles? I know at least two of you do. No, Super Eagles are not your average Philadelphia Football Eagles by day and crime-fighting Superheroes by night. No, the Super Eagles are these guys: The National Football team of Nigeria! Perspective is everything. If you go to Nigeria and talk about the Eagles this is who they would think of.

Bad fans

Sadly, these two teams are notorious for having fans who have lost all perspective. Both are some of the most obnoxious fans in the league. In rankings for most obnoxious fans at Thrillist.com, Eagles fans were ranked as the 5th highest worst fans (if you can follow that sentence). The site had this to say about Eagles (Iggles) fans:

Eagles fans are the people who get into fights at an 8-year-old girls' T-ball game, possibly with an 8-year-old girl. They just enjoy spite and hatefulness for the sake of spite and hatefulness. Not to be all cliché (and, yes, we can see your eye-rolling now, Iggles fans), but you are a fanbase that booed Santa Claus, cheered when an opposing player got a career-ending neck injury, and threw batteries at the Easter Bunny.

I know you Patriots fans are expecting a win here, and maybe it is. The Patriots were in a familiar position: #1. On the list of most obnoxious fans. A *Sports Illustrated* list of "most hated" has the Patriots as most hated team, their Coach, Bill Belichick, as the most hated coach, but again the Eagles as the most hated fan base.

Believe it or not the Bible actually has a handful of scriptures about sports. 1 Corinthians and Timothy and Acts all use the metaphor of competitive running. We are urged to run the good race, to train hard, even to run to get the prize. But they all are examples for us to keep perspective as Jesus followers. These scriptures recognize there's something positive in the race and competition.

I know it is a mixed metaphor: as people who seek to thrive and grow in the ground which we've been planted, we also seek to run the race worthy of our calling as followers of Jesus. In all seriousness here are some things we can watch for in the game tonight to keep perspective:

- This is a day of excess. 1.25 billion Chicken wings, 11 million pounds of potato chips, 12 million pizzas, 120 million pounds of avocados. Commercials will run \$5 million for thirty seconds. What are the ads telling us about who we need to be, and what we need to buy? What holes are they promising to fill in our lives?

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- Will any players be kneeling to respectfully draw attention to the deep seated racial inequalities in this country. If they do, what do you think and why? If they don't, think about how the almighty dollar and allegiance to the military have negated that movement. Can a line be drawn between NFL profits, military and end to kneeling?
- How do we treat players who are injured? Now and in their future.

LESSON #3—IT'S ALL ABOUT THE LOVE

Okay last lesson, and it has everything to do with perspective: as followers of Jesus we are People of Love. Now this is where I could really lay it on thick about how Philadelphia is quite literally the “City of Brotherly *Love*.” But full disclosure, *phileo*, the Greek word in Philadelphia, that means love is really just a strong kind of like. It's a friendly fondness and affection. It's not life-giving love. It might be a first step towards the love that Jesus really calls us to, but just a first step. Because the love that Jesus calls us to is *agape* love. “Big love” I called it last week in the children's time. This is the love that is deep and wide. This is the love that God has for us. This is the love in us that loves another person just because another person is made in God's image. This is the love that crosses silly boundaries like which team we root for, and reaches out to those who are really different, even our enemy. We are people of love.

Grow where you're planted

Keep Perspective

Remember, It's all about Love

So enjoy the game tonight.

