

The Jersey Effect

Not Idols, But Bread

Frankton – 9/28/14

Scripture: John 6.32-35 I am the bread of life

Proposition: Idols let us down by making us want more while Jesus fills us.

Remember, we are in a sermon series that's the reason for your wearing your jerseys today, and for the next several weeks. [SLIDE] The series is titled: The Jersey Effect, and it comes from a book of the same name by Hunter Smith. Hunter was the Indianapolis Colts punter during the 2006-7 NFL season, the one when the Colts won the Super Bowl. Yes, Hunter the punter. Hunter is a devout Christian still living in Zionsville. He wrote his book by inviting several players and coaches he knew were Christian to write to him and tell him the effect wearing a pro football jersey had on their lives. Hunter's purpose for writing the book was to write about the effect that wearing the jersey can have on a pro athlete, and also about the impact a pro player can have because of his jersey. You might be surprised to find out about the struggles all of these men had, even though they were successful professional athletes, adored by so many people. We're looking at their struggles and how we struggle with the same things, and how, with God's help, we can overcome those struggles.

Dylan Gandy [SLIDE] was a back-up center for the Colts during their Super Bowl Season. He backed-up Jeff Saturday, whom we talked about a few of weeks ago. Dylan graduated from Texas Tech University before being drafted by the Colts; he ended up playing three seasons with the Colts, and several more with other teams, primarily the Detroit Lions. He was never the star center for the Colts, Jeff Saturday was. But he was one of those solid back-ups that every team needs at every position in order to have one of those magical seasons. He and Hunter Smith became close friends during Gandy's years with the Colts, maybe in part due to their shared background of growing up in Texas. During their time together and after Gandy got traded, they kept up a running game of "Country Music Trivia" by texting over their cell phones.

The last time we were together we talked about Ben Utecht's story where he snubbed his dad right before the Super Bowl. Dylan Gandy's story starts way before the Colts even made it to the Super Bowl. In fact, it starts at the beginning of that season. He had been playing well while filling in for an injured teammate (Jeff Saturday), but he had a really bad game midseason. His words was that he "tanked." And between Saturday coming back from injury and his own not playing well, he couldn't find his way back onto the field – even for mop-up duty when a game was out of hand. By the time the Super Bowl rolled around, in his mind he had gone from being a great asset to the team to a liability to the team. He wasn't playing so he wasn't helping. He had completely lost all his confidence and he almost felt like he didn't belong on the team.

Now, because of that, Gandy's experience at the Super Bowl was a lot less than it could have been. The hype-filled two weeks between the AFC Championship game and the Super Bowl should have been a great time for Gandy – as it was for the other Colts. However, he couldn't shake the idea that somehow he wasn't a help to the team. His emotions were all self-centered and small-focused. To use his words, [SLIDE] "I was swimming in a pool of self-pity." Our lives are filled with moments where we find ourselves playing roles that were bigger than we expected and also times

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when we find ourselves playing roles that were smaller than we expected. That's where Dylan was.

Our ambition and our expectation can be great sources of fuel that keep us motivated to accomplish great things. Anyone who has ever accomplished a great thing had ambition and expectations. Mother Teresa had ambition – she wanted to feed the poor of Calcutta. She also had expectation – she expected that somehow God would help her. However, Gandy wrote that his ambition and expectations ate him up. He said that he had allowed football to become an idol to him. He had been playing football since seventh grade and had spent all those years hearing from other people how good he was. That seduced him into developing a football-centered identity rather than a person-centered identity. [SLIDE] His identity was all wrapped up in what he could do, not who he was. In basketball-crazed Indiana, we do that with young basketball players on a regular basis. We tell them all along how good they are, building a basketball-centered identity within them. With this football-centered identity, it was easy for Dylan to get discouraged when he wasn't getting any playing time for the Colts, even though the Colts were in the biggest game of the year. His team was playing in a game that so many players never experience their whole careers and he couldn't get past his not playing. He ended his comments in the book by writing, [SLIDE] “When your idol isn't treating you well, it will eat at you and slowly destroy you.”

I think that is where the [SLIDE] Rich Young Man in Luke 18 was coming from. Now I know a lot of you know this story but it will do you good to hear it again. There was a rich young man, or ruler in some translations, that had heard Jesus and something inside of him was stirring. He had heard Jesus speak of the coming of God's kingdom and had heard Jesus speak about eternal life. This rich young man's earthly life had been pretty good to him, hence the rich part of the title. So he was certainly interested in attaining eternal life. So he asked Jesus what he had to do to get this eternal life that Jesus was talking about. Jesus tells him to follow the Commandments: no lying, no stealing, no adultery, etc. And this rich young man has the chutzpah to say that he has followed these from his youth. That in itself is a pretty brash statement. It probably comes from someone who has gotten his way throughout his life and been told by others how good he is all his life.

At this point I can see Jesus pause for just a minute looking this rich young man in the eye. I can see him silently saying to himself, “You just don't get it. You can't follow them all; it's not humanly possible. That's why I'm here.” I can see Jesus peering into this rich young man's soul. I can hear Jesus tell this rich young man: [SLIDE] *Sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.* [22] And now I can see the face of the rich young man. His hope has been shattered. His idol let him down. All his money and his past behavior can't get him what he wants. He wants to play in the Super Bowl of eternal life, but the price is too big. He has to give up the life he knows here, the life he idolized here – and he just can't bear to do that. So he walks away.

The rich young man had a firm grip on his world's institutions. He had an unhealthy grip on his culture's version of what we call “the American Dream.” When Jesus asked him to surrender all that he knew, all that he had placed his faith in, he couldn't do it. So he walked away sad, rejecting Christ and the opportunity to find everything he was looking for. It's no different today. We grasp onto many things. Dylan Gandy grabbed football. None of us in here can grab what Gandy did. But we have other things we can grab onto: money, power, status, fame, a privileged lifestyle.

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And when we do that, we invariably hold on only loosely to Christ. We end up wanting more and more of this world and its hunger-creating institutions and we want less and less of Christ.

I think we have to come to grips with the same thing Dylan Gandy finally came to grips with: [SLIDE] life is much bigger than what you idolize. He finally got it. He realized that life needs to be from an eternal perspective. Life is not about us; it's about God. We are to use our life for Christ. What if you are like Dylan Gandy and you prepared your whole life to play in the Super Bowl and your number wasn't even called? Does that diminish the experience of being at the game? There are more important things than that. Maybe you are where you are not to make a leaping catch for a touchdown, but to witness about Jesus to the one who made the catch. Maybe you are where you are not to snap the ball to the quarterback, but to talk with the quarterback when he's hit a rough spot in life and you can help him get through it by telling him how you get through yours – with the strength of the Holy Spirit and a loving church family. No matter how big the game seems to be, God's game is bigger.

I think one of the things we need to understand is that all of these earthly things we thirst for – power, fame, money and the like – are not fulfilling. They leave us searching for more. Here's a prime example. Hunter Smith wrote about a time shortly after the Colts won the Super Bowl. Several of his teammates along with Coach Dungy, Jim Irsay, and Bill Polian were at a visit to the statehouse in downtown Indy. The reason for the visit was to let some of the local and state politicians have a few minutes with them. Everyone was congratulating them and shaking hands and high fiving. But Hunter noticed something about the tenor of the gathering. While everyone was saying, "Great job!" and "We're proud of you!" most were also adding something to the effect of, "We can't wait for you guys to do it again next year." Here they were just a few short weeks after their Super Bowl victory, they were hearing that there was going to be another Super Bowl the next year and they needed to win that one too. [SLIDE] Our world thrives on creating thirst. Culture, economics, society, government, entertainment and all institutions of this world are only able to exist in their current state because of their innate ability to fill something in us. But they always leave us wanting more. All our institutions create thirst in us. We have to keep coming back to get our thirst quenched.

Jesus talked about that in the end of John 6, this morning's scripture. Let me set the stage for you. At the beginning of chapter 6, Jesus performs the miracle of feeding five thousand people with a couple of fish and five loaves of bread. Everyone ate until they were full and there were twelve baskets of food left over. The next day the crowd went looking for Jesus. Why do you think they went looking for him? They were hungry again. They needed more bread to fill their insatiable appetite. Jesus tells them: [SLIDE] *...you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs.* [26] He goes on to tell them that God wants them to believe in him and the crowd answer that for them to believe, he must show them miraculous signs, just like Moses did when he gave the Israelites manna during the Exodus.

Notice their mistake. They said Moses gave them bread. They were wrong. God gave them bread. Jesus points out their mistake and says that God is offering them bread from heaven as well. They don't get what Jesus is saying. They are thinking of actual bread. So they ask Jesus to give them some of this bread that he is talking about – again expecting actual bread. That when Jesus answers with the famous line [SLIDE] *I am the bread of life.* [35a] But he goes on to say something really important to those of us who live in this world where bread only satisfies us for a day.

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[SLIDE] *Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.* [35b]

And that's the really important part. When we partake of Jesus, we don't hunger anymore. Wealth may leave us wanting more wealth. Power may leave us wanting more power. Fame may leave us wanting more fame. But with Christ, we don't hunger anymore. We are satisfied. It's what the theologian Blaise Pascal wrote about. He said there was a God-shaped hole in us and since it is God-shaped, nothing can fill it except God. We can only be satisfied with God. He, and only he, fills that God-shaped vacuum. What we're talking about here is having a deep relationship with Christ. It's not about doing, doing, doing. It's not about just going through the motions at church. It's not attending Bible study because of some crisis you're going through. Those all help. All these are fine outward displays, but only if they flow out of a heart that sincerely loves Jesus will they fulfill. And that's only because Jesus fulfills.

Dylan Gandy tried to fill a God-shaped hole with a football, and it didn't work. He missed out on a great opportunity to celebrate the biggest football game of his life because he had the wrong piece filling that God-shaped hole. Don't let that same thing happen to you. Fill the God-shaped whole with God and watch him satisfy you for the rest of your life. And remember, you have an eternal life.