

First and Goal

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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: Matthew 2 (Selected verses – Scripture is not read apart from the message.)

Most boys have at some point asked for a new football for Christmas. Many of you have used that Christmas gift to become very good at the sport and have gone on to play for your high school and perhaps college teams. Some of us have not had that opportunity because of our stature and perhaps our gifts in other areas. Some of us just played the game for the fun of it, and that's it. On the Sunday after Christmas, after the gifts and the New Year's Eve parties, there is a distinct focus on football today and in the days ahead. Also, we stand today on the threshold of a new year with all the possibilities it brings to us and the life of this church.

I have to apologize to some of you who do not follow football and could not care less about the game. I do not mean to exclude you but rather give you something to discuss with the gridiron lovers in your family. Why? Because life is like football! I trust that we can agree today that all of us can improve in the game of life? Today it is first and goal, and we want to look at how the game of life might come out for you in 2012.

Life is like football – that's not original with me. The late Southern humorist, Lewis Grizzard, said, "The game of life is like football. You have to tackle your problems, block your fears, and score your points when you get the opportunity. The legendary coach, Vince Lombardi, put it a bit more forcefully: "Football is like life, it requires perseverance, self-denial, hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and respect for authority." Coach Lombardi went on to say, "Football is not a contact sport, it's a collision sport. Dancing is a contact sport."

I invite you to explore two issues with me today. 1) What is the goal? How do we recognize those goals worthy of our pursuit? 2) What must we do to keep the goal before us?

The Game Is On

The clock began on game 2012 just a few short hours ago. Unlike football, there are no time outs. Every second counts, and on that point, everyone is evenly matched. We have been on the field for almost 12 hours, yet our accomplishments are already so remarkably different. Many of us slept for the majority of that time, but don't be too hard on yourself. It's early in the game, and there is plenty of time left. How many of us defer the critical decisions of life or defer on critical opportunities of life because "there is plenty of time left"? How wrong would it be to have that attitude on the field in the big game? Oh, we have an opportunity to score here, but we will settle for a field goal. You say, that's not so bad. What about the team I read about recently who punted on first down because they did not want to run the score up on the opponent? You don't pass up opportunities to score and expect to win the game. Ask the 2011 Alabama Crimson Tide – not to be picking on them, but certainly a clear example.

Goals

Plenty of time for what? Why are we here? What IS the goal? The goal is pretty clear in football. It is to cross the plane of a line with the ball for which your team is awarded six points. (Plus the points for kicking extra points and field goals, of course.) In life, there are sometimes competing goals, and we may have trouble figuring out which one to go for. We end up pulled in too many directions, and are dissatisfied with our progress on all of them. Having a specific goal and understanding what it looks like, where it is, and what we gain by achieving it gives purpose to our lives. Humorist Arnold H. Glasow once said, "In life, as in football, you won't go far unless you know where the goalposts are." And your best chance of scoring in football is if the goalposts are in front of you. If your team is lined up looking toward the goalposts, you're in possession of the ball, and you are clear about which direction you are moving. That sounds so obvious, but all of us

know people who are not even facing the goal and have no real idea why they should attempt to do so.

What is your goal? We have a strange attitude toward “goals”. We think immediately of competition and winning – both on the field and off. We want our companies to get the most business. We want to be more successful, better educated, more influential, better positioned. Attainment of goals in our minds is almost always at someone else’s expense. That really is not the kind of goal we need to think about moving into 2012. In God’s Kingdom, there was only one loss necessary for all of us to win. Jesus sacrificed himself willingly on the cross to provide the perfect sacrifice to pay for our sins – even the ones we have not committed yet! Our financial goals, career goals, personal goals – whatever – must be based on the goal of living a life of faithfulness to Jesus Christ and one that honors the love God had for us in making that sacrifice through Jesus to redeem us.

The Mission Statement of the United Methodist Church is “**Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World.**” That mission is expressed in this church when we declare that we are “**A Mosaic of God’s Family: GATHERING to embrace God and all people; GROWING in faith, love, and joy; and GOING into the world to serve and share Jesus.**”

What We Must Do To Keep the Goal Before Us

Living a life of faithfulness that honors God in a chaotic world is difficult. Realistically achieving the goals implied in these mission statements will be challenging. Simply put, some things must change. While not an exhaustive list, permit me a few suggestions:

1. Rely on the Holy Spirit to Help You and Equip You

The major reason unbelievers have a hard time fulfilling their new year's resolutions is because they are doing it with their own strength. No one person can win a football game alone, and no team can win unless they have a clear understanding of who the opponent is and what it will take to defeat the opposition. God has given to us the Holy Spirit and all things that pertain to life and godliness. Therefore a new hope comes with new challenges and goals, because the Spirit of God is always there to teach and direct our paths.

2. Build on Past Successes and Learn From Past Failures

Charles Swindall said, “Great accomplishments are often attempted but only occasionally reached. Those who reach them are usually those who missed many times before. Failures are only temporary tests to prepare us for permanent triumphs.” Great football programs are full of dedicated people who insist on continuing to work to improve the game.

We all have failures in our lives. It's what we do with them and how we respond to them that makes the difference. The way we deal with failure determines how we sustain motivation. It has been said that a successful person fails two out of every five times, while the unsuccessful person fails three out of five times. Not a lot of difference. We need to look at how much we missed the mark and then make the necessary adjustments that will help us to make the mark more perfectly in the coming year as individuals and as the church.

Think of a goal as a target. The bull's eye is 100. Concentric rings are 80, 60, 40, and 20. You should aim for 100, but sometimes you may hit only 80 or even 20. But if you don't aim for 100, you will hit zero every time. Someone said, "I would rather attempt to do something great for God and fail, than to do nothing and succeed."

After Eisenhower won the Republican nomination for President from Robert Taft in 1952, a reporter asked Taft about his goals. He said, "My great goal was to become President of the United States in 1953." The reporter smirked. "Well, you didn't make it, did you?" He said, "No, but I became senator from Ohio!"

3. Set New Goals

Proverbs 29:18 says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Without vision and direction you will resist those areas of change that the Lord wants to bring into your lives and the life of the church. Think about what your goals are for the coming year and then write them down. They cannot be the same ones you had last year. People change. We grow, and the things we do to be faithful to God's call for our lives change bringing changes to the life of the church. List those things that you know should change in your life such as:

- Areas you want positive change in the coming year.
- Areas where you want to be more faithful.
- New growth opportunities and experiences you want to pursue.
- Areas where your level of commitment could and should change.
- Things you know God wants to do in and for your family.
- Become accountable to someone in the areas where you are looking for change and growth. Telling someone solidifies your commitment and makes it more likely that you will be faithful.

4. Be Dedicated, Committed, and Undeterred

Anyone who tells you that living the Christian life will not cost you something is not telling you the truth. Just as football players sacrifice themselves to the pursuit of the goal, we also are called upon to sacrifice. Is the sacrifice worth it? All of us have to answer that question for ourselves.

If we decide to embrace God's call and keep the goal before us, we will need to put some turf behind us. We may be called to leave behind old resentments, fears, disappointments, failures, and wounds. We should not underestimate how difficult it is to leave such things behind. We nurse those resentments and disappointments and failures and wounds because they are ours...and they give us a reason to compare ourselves to others, to see ourselves as better than others, to give us a sense of our worth. We may have to leave behind us some of our own personal achievements...our awards and trophies and honors and recognition that we have falsely believed gave us worth. They give us recognition...but our worth comes from God.

If we keep the goal before us, we have the potential of leaving behind everything that has hurt us, everything that has wounded us, everything that has robbed us of a sense of security. We have the potential to arrive in the end zone, where we are embraced by God's love.

God loves you. God claims you. God has a goal of justice and peace and shalom and holiness in the world, and God wants that justice and peace and holiness and shalom for you...and wants you on the team that's bringing it to the world. This is the blessed assurance out of which we establish our goals and live them out. Miss this one, and you miss the point entirely.

In football, you can sit on the bench and still be part of the team. Success in the Christian life requires faithfulness in actively pursuing the goal. You can sit on the bench. You can sit in the stands. But games cannot be won by those who are on the bench or in the stands. We are not called to be spectators but full participants in God's work.

Scriptural Example

In Matthew 2, the Wise Men came from the East to find Christ. That was their goal. Is it yours? They made a long determined journey overcoming great difficulty to find the Christ. They were instructed by Herod, the worldly leader, to betray the location of the King of Kings, but they were told by God to go back another way. They listened to God. Maybe you need to go another way in 2012. Maybe you have been following the desires and demands of the world. We are all growing or dying, so examine your life today and see if you need to go another way.

Promises to Be Kept

As I said earlier, we are more apt to keep promises made in the presence of others. Wesley made it a practice to renew the commitment he made to God at the beginning of each new year, and he encouraged others to do the same. Today, I invite you to join me in renewing our vows to God and our commitment to one another as the Body of Christ, the Church.

[Turn attention to the center aisle of the church. Everyone is invited to turn and face the center of the sanctuary.]

Join me now as we renew our commitment to God and to one another:

First and Goal: Believe, Love, Obey

Lord, it's the first day of the year and my goal is honoring you.
I will put you first and never lose sight of the goal.
I will honor your call for my life with every bit of strength I have.
I will rejoice in your presence in my life, even when I no longer sense you near.
I will tell your good news, but I will live it, too, not just in churchy settings, but in daily life as well.
I will remember that you are the source of my blessings, not my problems.
When times are dark, help me remember that it is you who gets me through it.

I will be a friend, because others need me and I need them.
Work through us Lord to strengthen one another.
To my brothers and sisters in faith:
I will love my brothers and sisters in the faith, strangers, and even enemies as our Lord taught.
I will honor each person as the unique creation of a unique God.
I will comfort you, help you, listen to you, pray for you.
I will laugh with you, cry with you, or just quietly abide with you.
I will work with you until every soul has heard the good news.
I will support the mission and ministry of the church with my prayers,
my presence, my gifts, my service, and my witness.

O Lord, may the promises I make today transform me into the very likeness of Christ.
May I experience the true JOY of putting you first, others second, and myself last.
May you, O God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glorified in our lives together as your church.
May the joy of abiding in your grace and peace, O God, be everlasting.
You are mine. I am yours. That's the way it is supposed to be.
Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Wesley's Covenant Prayer (modernized).

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by you or laid aside by you,
enabled for you or brought low by you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
you are mine, and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

New Years Wishes

1. May you get a clean bill of health from your dentist, your cardiologist, your gastro-endocrinologist, your urologist, your proctologist, your podiatrist, your psychiatrist, your gynecologist, your plumber and the IRS.
2. May your hair, your teeth, your face-lift, your abs and your stocks not fall; and may your blood pressure, your triglycerides, your cholesterol, your white blood count and your mortgage interest not rise.
3. May you find a way to travel from anywhere to anywhere in the rush hour in less than an hour, and when you get there may you find a parking space.
4. May Sunday evening, December 31, find you seated around the dinner table, together with your beloved family and cherished friends, ushering in the new year ahead. You will find the food better, the environment quieter, the cost much cheaper, and the pleasure much more fulfilling than anything else you might ordinarily do that night.
5. May you wake up on January 1st, finding that the world has not come to an end, the lights work, the water faucets flow, and the sky has not fallen.
6. May you ponder how did this ultramodern civilization of ours manage to get itself traumatized by a possible slip of a blip on a chip made out of sand.
7. May you be awe struck by God's sense of humor as you wrestle with the possibility that a professional wrestler had a chance to become President of the United States.
8. May what you see in the mirror delight you, and what others see in you delight them.
9. May someone love you enough to forgive your faults, be blind to your blemishes, and tell the world about your virtues.
10. May the telemarketers wait to make their sales calls until you finish dinner, and may your check book and your budget balance and may they include generous amounts for charity.
11. May you remember to say "I love you" at least once a day to your spouse, your child, your parents, your friends; but not to your secretary, your nurse, your masseuse, your hairdresser or your tennis instructor.

12. May we live as God intended, in a world at peace and the awareness of His love in every sunset, every flower's unfolding petals, every baby's smile, every lover's kiss, and every wonderful, astonishing, miraculous beat of our heart. A Very Happy New Year to All!
[Author unknown -- from Aiken Drum]

Football Terms for Church

Benchwarmer: Show up on Sunday eleven o'clock sharp and leave twelve o'clock dull. They do not sing, pray, work, and apparently do nothing but take up pew space.

Sidelines: where lukewarm Christians always are.

Running back: one who is unafraid to meet the opponent head on by faithfully proclaiming the truth of God's Word.

Linebacker: one who defends the faith against all attacks.

Back Judge: one who only criticizes and never gets in the game.

Nose tackle: method the pastor's wife uses to try and keep church gossip to a minimum.

Assistant coach: an associate pastor.

Stiff Arm: do not lay hands on anyone quickly.

Off-season: summer vacation when church attendance falls off.

Overtime: sermon continues past noon.

Coin toss: taking up an offering.

Pigskin: smoked ham at the church potluck dinner.

Punt: point in the sermon where due to lack of response from the congregation, the pastor veers off-course from his sermon in desperation to regain the attention of the people.

Punt return: congregation's response to pastor's punt.

Defensive holding: gripping the back of the pew in front of you when under conviction.

Delay of game: method special singers employ when their performance track is not cued to correct song.

Offensive guard: persons who are constantly looking for something to be offended by.

Quick count: estimate of Sunday attendance.

Dead ball: awkward silence during the sermon in which pastor is pausing for an amen, which he never receives.

Roster: official list of church members whether they are currently attending or not attending.

Excessive timeouts: crying babies interrupting the service numerous times.

Eligible receiver: a faithful servant of the Lord who can be trusted to do the work of the ministry.

Unnecessary roughness: where gossiping has become a spiritual gift.

Formation: with whom we gather with in the foyer after the service has ended.

Signals: silent communication between the worship leader and the guy manning the sound board.

20 Second Time Out: pastor hasn't prepared effectively to preach the Word of God on Sunday. Therefore, he extends a time of corporate prayer and singing that he claims is led by the Spirit, so that only ten minutes is left in the actual service time. He then uses remaining moments for congregational testimonials as an expression of "encouraging one another." He concludes by saying, "I guess we're out of time today, we'll have to pick up the text again next week... but hasn't the fellowship been sweet this morning?"

Field Goal: getting at least something out of a poorly prepared sermon.

Safety: proof that no one on the elder board had your pastor's "back."

Touchdown: preaching the gospel in all its truth and seeing a non-Christian come to Christ for salvation, or a believer repent of their waywardness in sanctification.

Special teams: church committees and home fellowship groups.

Scrimmage: informal meeting of a "special team."

Extra Point: when you thought that the pastor said, "now in conclusion" at least twenty minutes ago.

Fumble: when the minister mispronounces a key word or O.T. name in his message, quotes the wrong verse, or theologically misspeaks and everyone notices.

Penalty Flag: when a member of the church acts like a faithful Berean in confronting the pastor(s) when something unbiblical was preached and affirmed.

Game ball: the Bible.

Home-field advantage: where long-time attendees think they are entitled to sit when newcomers show up.

Dime back: giving a tenth of your income.

Huddle: Meeting of the elders and pastoral staff.

Head coach: the pastor.

Reverse: a former Arminian who is now Reformed.

Too many men on the field: congregational rule.

Interference: when pragmatics captures the hearts of some of the members absent of sound doctrine—methods vs. message.

Incompletion: John Mark.

Unsportsmanlike conduct: when tolerated undisciplined sin manifests itself.

Winning percentage: sanctification is daily occurring.

Quarterback Sneak: when the pastor makes a move that the elders and deacons weren't prepared for.

Draw Play: what children do with the church bulletin during worship.

Half-time: the period between Sunday School and the main worship service where many choose to leave.

Backfield-in-Motion/Man in Motion: too many restroom or water fountain runs during the service.

Staying in the Pocket: what happens to a lot of money that should be given to the Lord's work.

Two-minute Warning: the point at which you realize the sermon is almost over, but it somehow goes on for another half an hour.

Instant Replay: the minister forgets his notes and falls back on last week's sermon.

Sudden Death: what happens to a church where sin is tolerated.

Trap: you're called on to pray the benediction and sleep through your cue.

Flex Defense: the ability to allow absolutely nothing said during the sermon to affect your life.

Halfback Option: the decision of 75% of the congregation not to return for the evening service.

Screen Play: using video and PowerPoint as part of your Sunday morning worship.

Blitz: the rush to the parking lot to get to the restaurant first following the closing prayer.

By: S. J. Camp