

**“We May at Times Experience the Worst,  
but We Keep Looking for the Best”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of  
St. Andrew’s United Church

for Sunday, May 1, 2016 – Easter 6

Scripture Readings: Revelation 21:10, 22 – 22:5

John 5:1-9

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It’s amazing how you can get odds for almost anything. Election results, trends in the economy, graduation rates, expectations about inflation, why even the odds as to when the ice will completely leave Ramsey Lake. We have the ability to see long range odds, and keenly expected results.

Last year there were a number of events that were at the odds of 5,000 to one – the odds of Kim Kardashian being elected President of the United States in 2020; the odds that Elvis Presley would be discovered alive. Even the odds of Leicester City winning the Premier League Championship in British football were 5,000 to one.

Now you may wonder why a minister of a church where gambling is discouraged, even denounced, is talking about the odds of events happening or not; just think of it as a statistics class for ordinary people.

Leicester City is playing Manchester United as we worship here today. A win within regulation time will provide Leicester with the points to win the Premier League, beating those 5,000 to one odds.

We all face incredible odds to accomplish almost anything in life. The sign of success, and the promise of future success (I ask the choir to especially hear this point), the sign of success in the future,

is based on one's ability to see an opportunity in the future no matter what we have experienced in the past.

We are not defined by our successes and even less defined by our mistakes and failures. Life is defined by what we are willing to seek, and the passion and energy by which we seek it.

Leicester City did not define its play on the field by its ranking in the sports pages; they went out and performed to the best of their ability.

Once I was talking to a young student who seemed sad and uncertain about what to do, yet was a spectacular artist. Why not pursue her ability in art? I asked. "I can't," came the immediate, unedited response, "I am not even the best artist in my class – I might be the third best painter in my class, at most, so I never could be a good artist."

That is hardly a definition of anything.

We may be fortunate enough to have around us skilled and capable people who will do well in life. Their success can only enhance our success. We help each other learn, grow, mature. Just because someone else is talented does not diminish my own ability and talent.

I want to ask the choir (unfair, perhaps, because I did not warn them): "Who is the best singer in the choir?" *[Immediately half a dozen pointed to one shy girl in the second row.]*

"Aren't you lucky to have such a wonderful singer in your choir?" *[nods all around, including from some parents in the congregation.]*

"Now I ask the rest of you: 'What are you doing singing in a choir if you are not the best singer?'"

The answers were quick and clear: “It is fun.” “I get to make friends.” “I learn good music.”

And unsaid, but equally valuable, “I am an important part of making the choir a choir.”

No matter how skilled an individual may be in singing, he or she cannot make a choir on their own. We need many people to make a choir, a blend of voices. And there would be very few in a choir if we felt “I can’t be in the choir because I am not the best singer.”

Life is about always seeking the best no matter what we have experienced in the past and how we have been disappointed. But it is about seeking our best and being the best we can be, not being the best of all people.

The passages for today from the writings of John speak to the need to follow in God’s ways. Whether it is defying laws about the Sabbath and rituals of long standing, or be it keeping sacramental actions at the expense of overlooking the needs of individuals, we are reminded that being religious, or spiritual, is something other than following religious laws.

We should be open to new ways of making sure that living in a godly way is not defined by limitations but by opportunities. Some have called this attitude as an attitude of seeing the glass half full instead of being half empty.

*[Two of the choir members held a glass each – one I said was “half-full,” the other “half-empty.” Then I asked them to tell me the difference. They could not.]*

I do not see the difference. In both scenarios, the glass, whether half full or half empty, has the same amount of fluid, and nothing will change unless something else happens.

What is that? The glass is able to be filled again.

Jesus' teachings today speak to the opportunity of adding value and worth to each scenario we experience.

A good coach or a good teacher is someone who encourages individuals – shows them how to add value and knowledge and skill and energy to whatever the task is they are learning or developing.

*[Put a sheet up at the front, and I asked what would we say about the best teacher or coach that we ever had in our lives. A series of ideas were shared: Patient, encouraging, expected good work, nice.]*

And if we made a list of the worst coaches or teachers we ever had, what would the list say? If you look at those two lists, you find that often the worst coaches or teachers or leaders are simply the opposite of the good or best teachers.

We are only one negative attitude away from being the worst rather than the best.

It is important to focus on the best in order to accomplish what is expected and needed. Jesus calls us to offer the best, look for the best, try our best, and we will not be disappointed. Words to live by.