



The Rev. Paul L. Gaston +  
Saturday/Sunday, February 4/5, 2017  
Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

## Moving Downfield

This evening, like you and many others, I will settle down in front of the TV to watch advertisements—and, occasionally, a football game. I don't care much about either the Falcons or the Patriots—even though a former Kent State quarterback, Julian Edelman, plays wide receiver for Boston. The game probably will not be one of the year's best.<sup>1</sup> Few Super Bowls offer really memorable football. I may eat too much snack food, and by the time the game ends, I will probably regret having spent so much time on it. Thank goodness redemption is just around the corner. Pitchers and catchers report for major league spring training in one week.

It is difficult enough in our society to honor the spirit of Sabbath on any Sunday. Giving a day to God by focusing on worship and rest sounds good—and would be good for us. But there's usually just too much to do. All the major stores are open. There's often work that has to be completed before the week begins—e-mail to check, bills to pay, arrangements to make. If we can find a couple of hours on Sunday morning to worship God, we feel good about that. And we should. After all, most others in our society do not even do that.

But the contrast between the spirit of Sabbath and the realities of Sunday in the 21st century seems particularly striking on Super Bowl Sunday. First there is the entire absorption of the Lord's day by the 60-minute event. Pre-game programming has already begun. Post-game analysis will take us into tomorrow. Heinz has initiated a petition calling on Congress to make the Monday after the Super Bowl a national holiday. The day of the Lord would be absorbed into this two-day sports festival and would be called "Smunday." (I'm not making that up.)

Then there is the conspicuous consumption. A policy officer in the Houston mayor's office has estimated that spending associated with the game—rental cars, hotels, restaurants—will add at least \$350 million to the city's economy.<sup>2</sup> So if you're a fan from Boston or Atlanta, welcome to Houston! But watch your bottom line. Yesterday, reseller prices for one ticket to the game were roughly \$6,000. Unless you want a good seat, say, one on the 30-yard line. That would set you back \$17,500.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, both Atlanta and Boston can boast higher-than-average household incomes, \$60,000<sup>4</sup> in Atlanta, \$68,000<sup>5</sup> in expensive Boston. But if we do the math, we find that a couple of not-very-good tickets to this one game will amount to nearly 20% of an average family's income. Add plane tickets, hotel rooms, and a couple of hot dogs and you're talking about a fourth of annual income. It had better be a very good ball game. Of course, most of those in attendance will be far from average. If you're a fan arriving on one of the 1100 private jets<sup>6</sup> flying in for the game, you probably don't need to worry.

In the face of this extravagance, which even many diehard fans find excessive, there are a few realities that Christians should keep in mind. They are familiar. There is of course the continuing rise of poverty in the United States, the sustained but now often overlooked risk of foreclosure for thousands of homeowners, the epidemic of homelessness, the neglect of the mentally ill. It would be easy to calculate how many meals could be provided for the cost of one seat on the 30-yard line. It would be easy to imagine the better uses our hypothetical couple from

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<sup>1</sup> I could hardly have been further off base. The game proved to be one of the most exciting in history.

<sup>2</sup> Source: CNBC.

<sup>3</sup> Source: NFL Ticket Exchange.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.deptofnumbers.com/income/georgia/atlanta/>

<sup>5</sup> Source: *Boston Globe*.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/douggollan/2017/02/01/private-jets-parties-and-plenty-of-planning-how-the-super-rich-will-watch-the-super-bowl/#3f8e043b1727>

Boston or Atlanta could find for the \$12,000 spent on tickets. It would be easy to estimate the number of vaccinations that could be paid for with the cost of just one ticket in the end zone.

Such comparisons are of course painfully obvious. We should keep them in mind, but there would be little value to our making ourselves and others miserable by dwelling on them. In the face of such large problems, there is so little any one person can do. Why should we even try? Let's just enjoy the game.

Jesus has the answer for us this morning. In two powerful metaphors, he recalls us to our mission, he reminds us where our priorities lie, he tells us that our calling as Christians is not primarily about us. Of course we want to share the assurance of God's love for us, we want to express our thanks for God's blessings, we need God's guidance, and we hope that we might be kept in eternal life. All true. But Jesus says us that our job is far bigger than our own concerns and hopes. We are here to share our message with the world, and in us lies the world's best hope.

Jesus tells us we are the "salt of the earth." We have watered down that phrase by using it to refer to someone who is just ordinary folks. But Jesus has in mind instead the value of salt for the preservation of meat. Without salt, meat spoils. Properly salted, meat is preserved and remains a source of nourishment. Before refrigeration, salt was necessary for life. But if salt becomes polluted or diluted, it loses its effectiveness. You can pour all you want on the meat, and it will spoil.

Jesus thus charges us to act as agents of preservation. By the work we do in the world, letting others know of Christ, making his example apparent in what we do, we can do our part to prevent the world from growing corrupt, spoiled, unfit for anything. We are the salt *for* the world. But if we allow ourselves to become diluted by the world, distracted in every possible direction, indifferent to the needs of those around us, unwilling even to think about the huge disparities in income that divide our nation, we may not be good for very much. Worthless salt to be thrown away.

And Jesus tells us that we are "the light of the world." Or at least that we *can be*. As Christians, we thrive on light. We begin our celebration of Easter by lighting the new fire and singing together, "the light of Christ." We repaint our steeple to summon pilgrims. We know that on Christmas Eve the glow of our windows can be seen throughout the neighborhood. We *are* the light of the world.

But Jesus asks us whether we allow that light to shine. Here at St. Paul's and at Christian churches throughout Akron, throughout Ohio, throughout the world, we sometimes seem to be weaving our bushel baskets. We may fear that if our light were to shine too brightly, it might annoy our friends. It might make us look weird to our neighbors. We might come across as fanatics and make others uncomfortable.

The bishop of East Tennessee, the Rt. Rev. Robert Tharp, encouraged the ordained to wear their clerical collars in public whenever possible. He called it "good advertising." I once attended a Saturday meeting at the diocesan offices in Knoxville wearing a sport shirt because I wanted to go out shopping afterwards. When he questioned me, I offered my excuse. "Son," he said, "when you're on active duty, you wear the uniform."

The church can be a lamp stand, a base on which we can set our light so that its rays spread far. But the church can also be a bushel basket, a comfortable enclosure that enables us to keep the light inside here for ourselves. But Jesus tells us that we are all bearers of light and that the world needs our shining. We must try to

set aside the bushel baskets of politeness, of nervousness, of timidity. We need to let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.

On this Sunday, as the world offers its displays of wealth, its costly advertising, its spectacle that we call the Super Bowl, let's enjoy what there is on offer. There really is very little we can accomplish through making others miserable. But let's temper our enjoyment with a sense of perspective. Even as we bite that one-too-many Nacho, let us recall that we are the salt. We are here to preserve the world. We are the light of Christ. We are here to shine that light before others.

Because we are on our own gridiron. And the clock is ticking. The two-minute warning is not far off. Jesus tells us this morning that we have moved into the red zone. That we need to get out of the pocket. That there are big gains awaiting us, but there is ground we have to cover, and there are obstacles in front of us that will get in our way. Jesus tells us that if we stay in shape and honor our commission as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, we need not be afraid to cross the goal line at the end of the field. It is time to earn some major yardage.