

# **The Life of a Cubs Fan: Theology of a Loser**

Sermon by Rev. Kent C. Matthies

*I have spent my entire life as a fan of the Chicago Cubs. As of this writing the Cubs have not won a World Series since 1908. What are the lessons for losing and living life? (November 2, 2003)*

1908, that is the first thing I need to tell you. 1908. For my entire life I have enjoyed baseball and been a fan of the Chicago Cubs. We Cubs fans consider ourselves to be an interesting breed and we often try to explain what it is like for us. The Cubs have not won the World Series since 1908, that's 95 years. For comparison's sake, Ronald Reagan was not even born the last time my team won the World Series.

The New York Yankees have won the World Series 27 times since 1908. With my family, I started going to Wrigley Field to see the Cubbies play 32 years ago at age 3 and we have seen them lose a lot. Many times my hopes would rise and then always crash to the ground. 1989 was one of the few times the Cubs made the playoffs and I was studying in Costa Rica. On the big playoffs weekend I had the opportunity to go to an island called Tortugero, where every year hundreds of turtles converge to lay eggs in the sand in a scene of natural wonder and awe. They don't have TV sets with reception on Tortugero so I stayed behind in the capital, San Jose, to watch my Cubbies on TV. Of course, while all my buddies were watching huge turtles laying eggs in the jungle on the beach, I was sitting alone watching the Cubs lose. I myself really felt like a loser.

This year the Cubs did it again. They beat Atlanta in the first round and were up 3 games to 1 on the Florida Marlins. We needed to win one game to go to the World Series. But then in the sixth game, we were up 3-0 in the eighth inning and it all collapsed—again. Now at some level, at some place in our guts, we Cubs fans knew this late season collapse was imminent. We knew the Cubs would lose, because really the Cubs are losers.

Almost every long-term Cubs fan will tell you that there comes a time when something happens to you. Something inside of you sort of changes. You realize that this World Series thing is not really going to happen. Seasoned Cubs fans eventually realize they can't pin all their heart and hopes on winning every year because that always ends in heartbreak. We have to accept ourselves for who we are: losers.

In life, losses come in all shapes and colors. Humans lose physical abilities in the aging process. Your minister is losing his hair. With injuries and physical pain we can lose peace of mind. When we move, change jobs, or when children change classes or schools, we can lose friends and established community ties. For countless reasons relationships at times become so estranged that communications cease and loved ones lose connections. Currently, through wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, and Zaire, millions of people have lost loved ones, sources of food, and a sense of security. Because one of the only constants in life is change, we are constantly losing people, places, and things.

In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Harold Kushner indicates that spiritual health often involves accepting that “no one ever promised us a life free from pain and disappointment.” Human hearts stretch greatly to experience a wide range of feelings, including pains and disappointments, which come in endless shapes and sizes.

I recently read a story about loss, which touched my heart. This story is found in a book written by a neurologist, Dr. Oliver Sacks, about his experiences with many of his patients. At the age of 65, Jonathan was driving and was hit by a small truck on the passenger side of his car. At the time, the accident did not seem serious. Soon after the accident, Jonathan lost his memory of the accident and suffered a severe headache. For about a week Jonathan experienced blurred vision and an inability to read. Eventually, in a somewhat unusual twist, this inability to read was replaced by an inability to recognize colors. Jonathan explained, “My world in a matter of days turned gray . . . it looked as if everything had become molded in lead.”

The tragedy of this story is that unlike his inability to read, Jonathan’s inability to see colors did not go away. Among other things, he lost the greens and blues of spring, and the yellows and reds of fall. Food all looked gray and unattractive. Perhaps most difficult, Jonathan was an accomplished painter who had worked with Georgia O’Keefe and he was devastated by the loss of his artistic abilities. Jonathan used words like “wrong,” “unnatural,” “stained,” and “disgusting,” to describe this new world in which he found himself. At some point he began isolating himself from friends. Dr. Sacks wrote, “The sense of loss and of shock was doubled and redoubled for Jonathan, for he had not only lost the beauty of the natural world and the world of people, but he had also lost the world of

art. . . . It was as if his past had been taken away leaving no trace, no inner evidence of its existence behind.”<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of loss can you forgive life’s imperfections and love it because it is capable of containing great beauty and goodness, and because it is the only world we have?

It seems Jonathan could easily identify with Paul Tillich, one the best theologians of the last century, when he said, “To live is to know loss . . . coming to terms with losing what is most precious to you is an inescapable part of being human.” Loss is everywhere in human history and experience. In my life I have experienced a number of painful losses. One of the earliest and mildest came from being a Cubs fan.

You see winning is not everything for a Cub’s fan. It can’t be, or you wouldn’t be a Cubs fan. Wrigley Field is the second oldest stadium in major league baseball, and it is a classic architectural gem. Wrigley has a beautiful brick outfield covered in natural vines. Joyfully, Wrigley sits close to Lake Michigan with a fresh breeze. You forget your troubles, talk with friends, laugh, and watch a ballgame.

From as early as I can remember my dad drove down to Wrigley Field in February to stand in line outside in the Chicago winter to buy tickets to four or six games of the upcoming season. Both of my grandfathers had died by the time I was four years old. In my church there was a gentle and kind man, named Hank Hanson. Hank served as a surrogate grandfather. When I was in my teens Hank was in his seventies and totally blind. But he had been a Cubs fan his entire life (he had missed the World Series victory by about three years), and Hank still wanted to go to Wrigley. So we would swing by his house, help him into the car, and bring him to games with his transistor radio. Hank could not see one pitch, or swing of the batter, or any runners rounding the bases. Hank sat and talked with friends, laughed, and listened to the broadcast of the game on his radio. Hank heard the fans cheer and the crack of the bat. He loved sitting there and feeling the game. He was thrilled to be in Wrigley with the Cubbies, even though they are losers. Painting you a picture of blind Hank Hanson sitting in glorious Wrigley Field is the last thing I need to tell you about what it is like being a Cubs fan.

Harold Kushner says that when a person experiences a tragic loss they eventually get to the point when he or she asks, “In the midst of loss can I forgive life’s imperfections and love it because it is capable of containing

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<sup>1</sup> *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Dr. Oliver Sacks

great beauty and goodness, and because it is the only world we have?" With his physical limitations, Hank Hanson said yes to the beauty and goodness of life.

Eventually, so did Jonathan the artist who lost his ability to see colors. As Jonathan went on after his car accident he began to explore the uniqueness of his condition. He noticed that he saw better in subdued light or at twilight. He also began to notice that he had a heightened sense of movement and depth. Subtle textures and patterns, which are normally obscured for the rest of us because they are embedded in color, stood out for him. At one point he "realized that maybe I had been given a gift, a gift to see the sunrise in a way few others had ever seen before." He said, "I now recognize that while my disease did indeed destroy my world, it also offered me a 'whole new world in exchange.' After seeing color-blindness as a curse, I now have somehow come to see it as something that has invited me to experience a new and different way of seeing, imagining, and being human."<sup>2</sup>

At its best, religion can help us to stop struggling so much with the question of why loss happens. Healthy religion helps us to focus more on how we will respond. We should never romanticize the pain of loss. But there are so many inspirational stories of people creatively focusing on what they have, even in the midst of disappointment. I recently read about a family who experienced unexpected financial problems, which led to the loss of their house. The woman said that through this experience she realized more than ever that ultimately material possessions don't make you happy. She said, "For every material thing we lost, we gained something of greater value." In listing all the character gains she and her family experienced after the forced sale of their dream home, she finished by saying that loss had served them well.

Former President Jimmy Carter has learned from loss. In his book, *Living Faith*, he writes, "In 1966, I ran for governor of Georgia and lost to avowed segregationist Lester Maddox. [My sister] Ruth drove to Plains and listened while I deplored the poor judgment and racist tendencies of my fellow Georgians and vented my anger toward God. I said, 'Ruth, my political life is over! It's not my goal just to grow peanuts, sell fertilizer, gin cotton, and build up a bank account. God has rejected me through the people's vote.' Ruth replied, 'Jimmy, you have to believe that out of this defeat can come a greater life.' I responded bitterly, 'There is no way I can

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

build on such an embarrassing defeat.’ Ruth explained that when we face trials with courage, we learn to endure and pray for wisdom. Wisdom leads us to depend on things made available to all through God's love.” Today we all know that in the wake of that and other defeats, over the last thirty-seven years, Jimmy Carter has used his brains and heart to enjoy life and to be of service to humanity.

With the death of *Peanuts* cartoonist Charles Schulz, many commented on his ability to reflect on the sadness of real life through the experiences of his characters. One journalist talked about Schulz's admiration for the losers of the world. With the theme of loving losers came the corollary of losing at love. Every major *Peanuts* character has an unrequited love—Charlie Brown and the little red-haired girl, Lucy and Schroeder, Linus and Miss Othmar. Even Snoopy got dumped at the altar.<sup>3</sup>

Most of us have experienced some form of unrequited love with romance, friends, or family. The reality is that in this life, in some shape or form, we all go through experiences as losers. Our challenge may be to find ways to experience our loss as a gift. How can we find new ways to love again? Quite often when we have lost one world, we have received a whole new world in exchange. It can require patience to figure out what the new world looks like. It can require emotional openness to learn how we will best respond to what we now have?

As we go out into this day, what is it that invites us to experience a new and different way of seeing, imagining, and being human?

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<sup>3</sup> Citation: Linda Gehrs, Oak Park, Illinois; source: James Poniewozik, "The Good and the Grief," *Time* (12-27-99)