

At the 10:30 am service on June 13, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Proverbs 15:1-5; 25:11-15 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10.

“Jesus and the 2010 Soccer World Cup – Coaching”

The scripture reading today is the opening words of Paul’s letter to the Macedonian church in Thessalonica. The city Thessalonika is still around today. It is the second largest city in Greece and is home to three leading soccer teams Aris, PAOK and Iraklis. Among them, they have won the Super League in Greece and the European Cup.

From its beginning three hundred years before the birth of Jesus Thessalonica has been an important city. It was a trade route from west to east and is a viable trade hub today. Significant cultural events and a global trade show take place in this beautiful city.

Soccer is capturing the city today since Greece is one of the 32 teams out of 204 countries that qualified for the 2010 World Cup Soccer tournament in South Africa, which began last Friday.

Apart from the fact that Thessalonika is a powerhouse soccer city, you might be wondering why I chose Thessalonians as my kick-off text for my sermon series: “Jesus and the 2010 Soccer World Cup.” Last Sunday the Bible Study group read today’s passage and when I reflected on it in the light of the 2010 FIFA World Cup I saw how upbeat it was and how like a soccer coach Paul was in the writing.

The theme today is “coaching.” My motto as a coach was: “Play hard and enjoy the game.” Paul is affirming the Thessalonian church. They are playing hard and enjoying the game. Playing hard to my mind was to be committed in every way.

Unlike most US sports, coaches in soccer spend time with the players in practice and generally back off during the game. There are no time-outs with coaches during the game. Thank God! Coaches and players connect at halftime. The coaches give feedback and encouragement and seek opinions of the players.

Paul could be writing this letter as preparation for his halftime speech. He has seen and heard how the Thessalonian church is doing and offers feedback and encouragement. How does he coach? Insights come from verses two through seven. Listen to the Word of God and think soccer and coaching. Listen with the mind of a soccer coach.

“We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God...your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”

A good coach is thankful for his team and if he has faith like Paul he will pray for his team. A journalist friend sent me a blog from South Africa last week with a story about the arrival of the Greek team in our home city, Durban. The Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church in South Africa welcomed the team and prayed for them.

Paul remembers before God the church's "work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." He wonderfully affirms the church. Faith, hope and love are transformed from nouns to verbs: work of faith, steadfastness of hope and labor of love.

Greek coach Otto Rehhagel affirms his team in a similar way. He says: "We have the togetherness and unity of purpose of a club side. This sort of bond – coupled with the enthusiasm, fighting spirit and the modesty they always display – can take you a long way. They are a disciplined, professional bunch and know how to make a game plan work."

Whether it is Paul speaking about the church or Otto Rehhagel speaking about his team the principles are the same: affirmation, affirmation, affirmation.

It is wonderful to be affirmed whether we are a church in action, a world class soccer team in practice, children at play, young people at school, workers in the field or parents at home. Everyone benefits from positive feedback and affirmation.

In the middle of the quoted biblical passage there's an interesting statement about choice. Paul writes: "For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that God has chosen you..."

Every human being is chosen by God to live to the best of his or her potential. God's grace goes to everyone. Members of the World Cup teams are chosen because they have brilliant soccer abilities and the coaches often get to choose them.

The similarity of the church and the World Cup teams is what we do with our chosen-ness. In the church we qualify for the team by accepting God's grace and living the faith the best we can just as the best soccer players play the best they can. They and we are dedicated and we practice. We pray and practice.

We do this in part by adhering to Paul's next words. He writes: "...you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia."

We become our best by imitating the best and for Paul it is him (a somewhat bold statement) and more importantly Jesus. A coach might point to his example. Argentine is coached by one of the best players ever in the world, Diego Maradona. This is his first national coaching job and the verdict is still out on his effectiveness as a coach.

Nevertheless, like Paul he can say be your best by imitating the player I was. Danish coach Morten Olsen who won 102 caps in his playing for Denmark might inspire from his experience as a player. Mostly, when it comes to imitating, coaches will most likely point to the best players. They will point to players who inspire on and off the field. They will point to qualities that make a player outstanding.

When Paul says imitate me and Jesus he is basically saying imitate the best among us. So we look to models, good examples of the faith in the church and we emulate them the best we can. Members of the Bible study spoke of Irene Kohler as someone to emulate. Irene died before I arrived two years ago so I know her by reputation. I hear she had a blithe spirit and was caring and joyful and worked wonders with the children in Sunday school.

She followed Jesus the best she could and so do we. We look at Jesus' life, his compassion, his concern for the sick, dehumanized and disenfranchised, his prayer-life, and his affirmation of peace with justice and we follow that the best we can.

Process Theology states Jesus' role as one who urges us on to the best of our ability. He encourages and inspires us. Jesus is concerned about us individually and as a church (the team). That sounds like a coach. The best coaches build their players as individuals and as teams. The best individual player in the world Lionel Messi from Argentina affirms this when he says: "Football (the international word for soccer) is a team sport, and we are the ultimate example of that."

Paul writes: "...you became imitators of us and of the Lord...you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." When we are well and thoroughly coached, and after we learn the best we can, we become who God has called us to be. And then, we become examples to others just as the Thessalonian church became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia and just as the 2010 World Cup Soccer players are examples to the billion viewers watching them in this tournament.

Finally, I found this week a book on coaching that I used in my coaching days. Responsibilities and expectations of a coach are listed at the end of the book. The final responsibility and expectation is: "To be capable of working miracles on a regular basis!" Coaches as miracle workers. That sounds pretty spiritual to me. Amen.