

At the 10 am service on June 27, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Philippians 3:10-14 and Luke 9:51, 57-62.

“Jesus and the 2010 Soccer World Cup – Goal”

The biggest word at the 2010 Soccer World Cup is “goal.” The purpose of the competition is to score goals and the “beautiful game” as it is called is considered more beautiful when goals are scored.

People wonder how one can enjoy a game that ends in a zero-zero draw where no goals have been scored. A game of soccer can be exciting even if no goals are scored but it’s nice to see goals and when they come they are often dramatic and thrilling.

The United States goal in overtime against Algeria which placed them at the head of their group and an advance into the group of 16 was absolutely thrilling. We were at the edge of our seats throughout the game and the wonderful pop into the net by Landon Donovan rocked the house.

For those who didn’t hear, I’m preaching a sermon series focused on the 2010 FIFA World Cup played in South Africa from June 11 to July 11. I am using soccer World Cup analogues in my sermons. There’s a different theme each Sunday. The first was “coaching,” the second last Sunday was “players to watch” and today it’s “goal.”

The sermons are posted on the church’s website. Today’s sermon will be posted tomorrow by noon.

The word “goal” appears twice in the Bible, both times in our first reading today, where Paul tells the church at Philippi that his goal is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.

In saying this Paul sets a standard for the church. To know Christ is to be intimately acquainted with Jesus: who he was and is and to make his life our life.

And like Paul, we want to know the power of Christ’s resurrection, in other words, to affirm life and hope in our lives and in the church. Paul also wants to share in Christ’s suffering by becoming like him in his death. This is a mystery but it basically affirms the sacrifice of the self that has a propensity for harm to the Self who put to death selfish and harmful deeds to affirm compassion and care in the resurrection.

In soccer World Cup terms I shall begin with the latter. Like the Olympics the soccer World Cup is a global village. Thirty-two countries are competing and thousands are visiting from around the world. A billion people are watching the games on TV or giant screens in cities and towns. The tournament is a wonderful spectacle of exuberance and color.

While we would like the village to be totally happy and harmonious it isn’t.

For instance, the French camp self destructed. Their performances in their first two games were below par and the organization fell apart. A key striker insulted the coach and the coach sent him home after he refused to apologize. A trainer argued vociferously with a player on the field. The coach separated them and the trainer stormed away and flung his stop-watch into the bush. The team walked out of practice to protest the player's dismissal. The director of the squad resigned and flew home.

This was a shocker and disaster for the team that won the World Cup two tournaments back and was a finalist at the last World Cup. The Minister of Sports in France consulted with Nicolas Sarkozy the President of France and then flew to South Africa. The President called the player's insults unacceptable and a former French Olympic trainer chastised the team for not setting an example as representatives of their country and models to young players.

To cap it off France lost their final game 2-1 against hosts South Africa. South Africans celebrated wildly and the French flew home despondently.

In biblical Pauline terms it would have been good for all parties in the French camp to "to share in Christ's suffering by becoming like him in his death," in other words, to sacrifice the part of the ego that gets in the way of respectful interaction and conversation.

We are challenged by Paul to remain cool in difficult and frustrating circumstances. We sacrifice the harmful ego and live. Paul writes that he had not attained the goal but pressed on to make it his own. France could have regrouped and pressed on but they did not.

As you've noticed, I'm using the word "goal" as a goal to be achieved and a goal which is a soccer ball in a net. The goal of soccer is to score goals. Paul has a goal and he presses on to make it his own.

Many of the soccer teams *are* pressing on to achieve their goals and they have a wonderful variety of ways of getting there. On a brighter note, and the total opposite of France, is the team from New Zealand.

The "All Whites" as they are called (as opposed to the famous "All Blacks" rugby squad) qualified for the World Cup by advancing through a weaker region, Oceania. The *2010 World Cup Guide* called New Zealand the team most likely to leave without scoring. They wrote: "New Zealand will look so feeble that tournament officials will (again) reconfigure qualifying out of the weakling Oceania region."

Eat your words *World Cup Guide* because New Zealand tied with Slovakia by scoring a goal in the last 30 seconds in overtime in their first game and then did what no one ever dreamt they would do, they scored the first goal against the World Champions Italy and held them to a 1-1 tie in their second game. Before the tournament, Italy was given a 14-1 chance of winning the World Cup and New Zealand a 2,000-1 chance. New Zealand did not advance to the second round but they exceeded their goal.

The team had the zest of Paul: “I *want* to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” New Zealand *wanted* to win. They broadcasted to the world: Don’t be put down or held back by the naysayer and don’t be discouraged when they say you are not good enough!

The All Whites showed us that if we really wanted to achieve something and we had the heart and will to do so we could. If we want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection we will. Life will be ours in full abundance. Like Paul we “press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

The second reading from the Gospel according to Luke is about goals and reaching those goals. The text opens with Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem. He had just descended from the Mountain of Transfiguration and now wanted to conclude his mission in Jerusalem. Nothing would deter his getting there. Others wanted to follow him but were equivocal about the journey.

The text is difficult to understand. It reads: “When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem...As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’”

The text needs a contextual reading to fully understand it. In the end Jesus is making a point about equivocation. The message is to commit to a goal and go for it even when there are a billion reasons not to go for it. If we don’t have a reason to commit we make one up.

The French were equivocal. Patrick Boudreault, chief football writer for the French daily newspaper *La Depeche* (quoted in *The Ultimate Guide: World Soccer*) writes: “The French team is capable of being either fantastic or awful. We could easily go out in the group stage (after the first three games), but we could make it to the final. It all depends on the desire of the group put together by a coach who really divides opinion here. There are issues regarding injury and lack of game time as well as whether the older and younger players can really come together.”

The guide quotes the coach Raymond Domenech as saying: “We’re a tight group for years already, all working towards a common goal.” After the current debacle star player Franck Ribery said: “I’m gutted, because we’re not playing football any more.” No one seems to be on the same page. Jesus wanted his disciples to be on the same page.

When I arrived at this church two years ago I was presented with the church’s goals and strategies. The Session reviewed these at their last meeting and it looks like we are on the same page in meeting our goals and more. Thank God for our intact team.

The same goes for a number of teams at the 2010 Soccer World Cup and high on the list of intact teams are the US (they have a long-term goal), Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, Paraguay, Germany, Ghana and Holland. The teams in the current round of 16 have to get focused and press on towards the goal, the prize, which is the World Cup. The US pressed on and was unfortunate to narrowly lose in overtime against Ghana yesterday. The team is on a trajectory and they will be back in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

Our "World Cup" is the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.