

**April 10, 2016 - John Reddekopp**

**SERMON: *Softball and the Body of Christ.***

### **1. Scripture: I Corinthians 12:12-31.**

The early Corinthian Church had a number of issues. One of these had to do with unity. The Apostle Paul addresses that issue in the 1 Corinthians Chapter 12 passage. Paul reminds the Corinthians that the church is made up of people with a wide array of gifts, backgrounds and responsibilities, (and obviously different personalities and I suspect different views on issues as well). He uses the metaphor of the human body to help them understand more fully how this community should function. Everyone is equally important. The foot cannot say that because it is not a hand it does not belong nor should the ear say, "Because I am not an eye, I don't belong". All the parts are important. They are all part of the makeup of the body. Nor can one part suggest to another part that they are not needed or are less important.

In order to hopefully help us to understand this passage and Paul's message on unity more fully we are going to use another metaphor.

### **2. Background:**

There have been many sermons preached and articles written about how baseball teaches us about God and even how baseball is the way to God. John Sexton, President of New York University, has written a book titled; ***Baseball is a Road to God***. He has also developed a college course with the same topic and uses baseball as a metaphor for the rich spiritual life and in his words;

"Baseball evokes in the life of its faithful, the features that we associate with the spiritual life; faith and doubt, conversion, blessings and curses, and so on."

It is perhaps not such a big leap to move from baseball to softball. So I will use the softball team as the metaphor for the Christian community or the church as we usually call it. This will be done by providing a brief overview of softball history from this area as well as some of my own story as it relates to this sport.

Softball, according to Wikipedia, 'is a variant of baseball which is played with a larger ball on a smaller field and where the ball is pitched underhand'. This sport is sometimes called fastball or fast pitch softball. It should not be confused with

slow pitch, where the ball is lobbed towards the strike zone with an arc. It is interesting though that in the later 1980's and through the 1990's there was an annual Canadian Mennonite Slow Pitch Championship with mainly church teams from Western Canada participating. Ben Buhler was one of the main organizers of this event.

### 3. Osler Monarchs

It was not long after the Mennonites in the villages and rural areas north of Saskatoon started to attend the English schools (In the 1920's), that the various towns and villages also had organized teams that competed in tournaments against each other. In the 1940's it went even a step further when the teams from Neuhorst and Osler combined to form the Osler Monarchs. This team joined the Saskatoon senior Men's Softball League and played regular league games at Cairns Field and also travelled to various tournaments as well as provincials and Western Canadian Championships. They became one of the top teams in the province during their existence. This team was made up mainly of players from Mennonite families, and many of these from Old Colony Mennonite background. It is interesting because as Carl Ens is quoted as saying in ***Safe at Home: A History of Softball in Saskatchewan***, "*Many of the parents and certainly the elders were not in favour of the youth getting involved in sports as it was seen as part of worldliness*" (Page 70). Those Monarch teams included Carl Ens, and his brothers Bill and Danny, Bill Braun, John Loewen, George and Aaron Braun, Alfred Driedger, John and Abe Fedrau, Al and Art Friesen, Lea, Ernie and Ed Hildebrandt, and many others over the years that the team was in existence during the 1940's and 50's. One of the non- Mennonite players who played for the Monarchs for one season was Gordie Howe, much better known for hockey, of course.

For many of those years that the Monarchs were in existence they also had a second team, known as the Junior Monarchs, competing in area tournaments and serving as a farm team. People like Dennis Boldt have played for this team.

#### 4. Another 'Mennonite' Team

In 1968, Jake Buhler was the principal of Martensville Elementary School and I was on the staff as a first year classroom teacher. A topic of discussion that came up frequently between Jake and I related to the fact that there were so many good ball players that were either playing for Osler High School or who had graduated but had played for Osler High School at one time and were playing ball or were very capable ball players. Somewhere in one of those discussions one of us asked the *why not* question. Why didn't we organize a team by bringing these players together? We both said that potentially we would have a very strong team. Perhaps they would be like the old Osler Monarchs. And so we did it! By that spring we had assembled a team that consisted of current and former students. There were multiple Froeses, Friesens, Buhlers, Reddekopps, Guenters, and one Lobe. In addition there were Osler High School teachers, Paul Enns and Bill Neudorf, who were signed as players along with Al Friesen who was to be our player/coach. Instead of us having the Osler name attached to us however, we were the Warman Gems. The main, and perhaps the only reason for this, was the fact that we were given or else we bought at a bargain price, a set of uniforms that had belonged to a now defunct team with that name.

It likely took all of Jake Buhler's charm to convince the executive of the Saskatoon Amateur Softball League that we would be competitive enough to play in the commercial B division. New teams were to start in the lowest division and work their way up. I don't believe that we lost any games that year and ended up winning the league championship. The next year we were placed in a newly formed AA Division and again won the league championship although I think we may have lost a couple of games since now we were facing pitchers like Gene McWillie who was playing with a team called the Texaco chiefs at that time. The Dalmeny Diamonds had a strong team as well. This was another team made up of players who were largely of Mennonite background. In later years, the Valley Merchants team with players like Russ Regier and Don Friesen, both active in the Mennonite community, was formed.

My coaching career started around the halfway mark of that first season. Our playing coach often could not make it to games. Jake and I were the team captains and we would be called to see whether we could take over for that particular game. I don't recall there being any formal discussion about this but somehow I think we decided that I was more expendable as a player than Jake and so perhaps by default I became the coach. Al Friesen became one of the

players without the title of coach. This was something that he preferred and I should mention that he had been an all star player in the Saskatoon Senior Men's League with both the Osler Monarchs and the Saskatoon College Lads. For my part I was hesitant about taking over as the coach. This might be the one and only way that I can compare myself to Menno Simons who was apparently at first quite reluctant to take over the leadership of a certain group of Anabaptists.

After winning the championship in the highest division of the Saskatoon Commercial Division, most of our team felt that we were ready to take the next step. This next step was to become part of the Saskatoon Senior Men's Fastball League. That was not an easy thing to do. In spite of the fact that we knew we could be very competitive we were denied. The league had their set five teams and they were not willing to alter that system but were definitely hoping that some of our star players would be added to some of their teams. Our players wanted to remain together as a team. We went into our spring training with the plan to go back into the Commercial AA Division. Then, near the end of that spring training we received an offer from one of the Senior Men's teams, K and K Olson. They were in danger of folding since they had only five players coming to practices and who could compete at that level of play. We went back to the league and offered to replace this team. The league said no and indicated that they would play with four teams. We went back to our team. A vote was taken and our team became K and K Olson.

I coached teams with this core group of players as they went through various transitions. Along the way names like Garry Guenther, Allan Loewen, Walter Bergen, Rob Guenther, and Barry and Cam Friesen were added. These were perhaps the glory days of softball in Saskatoon. The stands at Gordie Howe Park were filled to capacity whenever there was a Gene McWillie and Pete Froese pitching matchup. Softball was often the headline story on the Star Phoenix sports pages. A game of the week was recorded by one of the television stations and replayed on their station on the following Saturday. The team remained as K and K Olson until 1978. At that time there was an offer from another sponsor, Don Funk, to take over the team. We became the All-O-Matic A's. After two years there was a concern about some of the changes that were happening and we formed a new team with a new sponsor, Arnie Koop, and became Arnie's (Muffler) Angels. After those two years many of that core group decided to retire in order to devote more time to family and other interests. They had won numerous provincial championships, competed in national championships in

places like Hull, Quebec, St. John's Newfoundland, Niagara Falls, and even Saskatoon. The highest placement at nationals was coming in second to British Columbia in 1976. The final score in that final game was 1-0.

### **5. My Coaching Story Continues**

Perhaps not all that reluctantly anymore, I have had a range of other softball coaching experiences. In the 1980's I helped to form and coached a team of youth players, from the valley area. Our son, Darren, was a pitcher on this team which also included names such as Derek Zacharias from Hague, Bruce Friesen of Osler, and Darren Guenther of Hepburn. We won provincial championships one year in Pee Wee A and twice in Bantam A. As well we won the Western Canadian Bantam Championships in Red Deer in 1987 and finished second in Victoria in 1986. From 1987 through 1989, I was a coach with the *Sask First* junior men's program. We had the task of developing a team and taking them to represent the province in the 1989 Canada Summer Games in Saskatoon. A number of the players that were on that valley area team were part of this provincial team as well. I have also done some part time coaching with a men's team from Warman and gone along to assist with coaching a Saskatoon Junior team in the Canadian championships in Quebec City and a Masters team in Western Canadian championships in Calgary. I have also been involved in many Softball Canada coaching clinics as a participant and later as an instructor.

### **6. Why So Many Mennonites in Softball?**

There are many examples and many stories involving Mennonites, in the sport of Softball. A significant number have even competed successfully at the international level. Names that come to mind are Rob Guenter, Tim Hildebrandt, Doug Hildebrandt, Dave Petkau, Terry Wiebe, and Dale Dirks. There have been many others. One could suggest a number of traits that that people of Mennonite background possess which would help them to be successful in the sport of softball.

Having a strong work ethic is certainly one of the traits that is frequently mentioned. But, I believe another one would be the Mennonite emphasis and experience of community. A softball team is a community. The Corinthian Church and Osler Mennonite Church are communities.

## 7. Commentary: Making Connections between the Two Communities.

Although I certainly would not want to place the softball community on the same level as the faith community, there are connections that can be made. Indeed there are even life lessons that can be learned from softball.

In the sport of softball when your team is at bat, the goal is to score runs. In order to do that you must get to touch home base. *Home is important!* Not many players will successfully get to home all on their own very often. There are those who have the power or they have the type of swing that results in homeruns from time to time. It is exciting when they do connect. It can inspire the rest of the team. Perhaps the hardest swing I ever saw was from my former high school gym teacher and later MLA, Bill Neudorf, who played with our Warman Gems team. I do remember him striking out a number of times but I can also visualize a couple of long homeruns. Homerun hitters can be important on a team but they cannot say to the line drive type hitters like Jake Buhler or off field hitters like Paul Enns, "I don't need you! I can score runs for this team all by myself!"

The more common way that runs are scored in a ball game requires teamwork. The leadoff hitter in an inning is expected to get to first base and the next batter will lay down a bunt in order to get him to second base. Our team was often most successful when we had Gerry Friesen and Arnie Guenter as the first two batters in an inning. If all worked according to plan, one of the third and fourth batters in the inning would get a hit and score the runner from second base. Now Jake Buhler will tell you that when I was coaching things were not always done in the traditional way. He recalls watching a game where I called for and we executed four consecutive bunts to score a run. Players who can do the little things, like bunting, are important on a team!

Further to that, I do recall when we played in a tournament in Chauvin, Alberta in 1976. We were in the final game with the score tied and of course it was the bottom of the 7<sup>th</sup> inning. I should mention that the bases were loaded and there was a full count on the batter, Barry Friesen, who was still a teenager at the time. He was a good bunter and he was a left-handed batter with speed. He had swung at two high rise balls, which were a weakness for him and which the other team had figured out. The third baseman had been playing in but with a full count had backed up. Surely, no coach would be foolish enough to call a bunt in that situation. Let me just say that the winning run was scored on a play that was not

*even close. In softball and in life, you have to know and utilize the gifts and strengths of the individuals in order for the team or community to succeed!*

Pitching was a large part of the game of softball but pitchers can't win games on their own despite the fact that many of the games ended up being 1-0. Somebody had to score that run.

Carl Ens apparently was the first pitcher in Saskatchewan to throw windmill which was something he learned from Eddie Feigner of the King and his Court fame. Further history tells us that his brother, Bill, once threw consecutive no hitters but ended up losing both games by a score of 1-0 due to some wild pitches. In the first years of the existence of our team we had my brother Jack who threw a very effective drop ball and we had Peter Froese. Peter threw deceptively hard with stuff on the ball and with an effective change up. More than that he excited the crowd without intending to and inspired his teammates with his positive and enthusiastic personality. Peter now lives in Colorado Springs where, among other peace activist activities, he provides and maintains bikes for homeless people. One of his favourite sayings was that the reason he and other pitchers tended to get as much attention as they did was because the pitching mound was in the centre of the diamond. He was genuinely humble. Rob Guenter joined his brothers and our team as a pitcher in 1973. That year he was pitching in the semi final game of the provincial championships in Melfort. It was early in the game and he was getting hit hard. I went to the mound to change pitchers. He was very upset with himself and told me that he would never pitch again. To which I replied that we would come back and win this game and that he would have to pitch the final. It happened that way and he pitched a great final game to help us win the championship. In the 1976 provincial championships he had to pitch the last two games back to back to beat the Saskatoon Merchants. He was the only healthy pitcher we had by that time. He had many other accomplishments with our team as well as with Victoria and Team Canada. For instance he pitched 14 innings to help Canada beat the United States 1-0 in the final of the Pan American Games in 1979. He is a member of more than one hall of fame and was selected as Saskatoon's athlete of the year. In the past few years he has worked as the pitching coach for Canada's national women's team.

Other pitchers who became well-known at the provincial and national levels in the 1960's and 70's were Pete Zacharias, originally from Neuanlage and Ralph Ens and Neil (Red) Friesen, both from Warman.

Pitchers trained hard! It reminds me of another metaphor from Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:25: "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last but we do it to get a crown that will last forever".

Both our Warman Gems and K and K Olson teams developed a strong sense of family. We involved the players' families whenever that was possible. I recall us taking our 3 young kids to a tournament in Alberta in our very basic truck camper and cooking hotdogs and tomato soup on a camp stove for the entire team and their families. Players developed a closeness that carried over into other areas of life. In all fairness of course, many of them had known each other for years. Leonard Doell served in various capacities for our team. He recalls that his parents felt good about him coming to games and other team activities even though he was younger than the team members. 1980 was the third year of the team playing under the All- O- Matic name. I had retired over the winter and the new coaches decided to let one of the key team members go during that spring. The response from the core group of players was to walk out and form their own team once again. Thus, my retirement ended and now we became Saskatoon Arnies Angels sponsored by Arnie Koop and his muffler shop. The family atmosphere was back and it was that closeness which helped us to deal with a tragedy which we experienced on May 31<sup>st</sup> of that year. Dennis Guenter, our catcher, and one of the key players and leaders on the team, the one who had called me and talked me out of my short- lived retirement, was one of two Saskatoon firefighters killed while fighting the Queen's hotel fire. We did manage against many odds to come in second in the provincials that year and serve as the host team at the Canadian championships in Saskatoon. *Successful teams and churches need to have a strong sense of family!*

## **8. Closing.**

Time for a little reflection: So what is your sense of our Osler Mennonite Church community? How well does this body function in light of Paul's description of how it should work? How are we doing as a team? I am often amazed how well we function. One of those times was when we hosted the Saskatchewan Mennonite Church Assembly last month. It was a



great example of different members working together as a team. It felt good!

All players and all members are important. That importance comes from the fact that we are part of the body, or the community, or the team!

There is also a saying in sports that, "A team is only as good as its weakest player". There is an onus on the individual members to grow or to improve but there it is also the responsibility of the group to help them do so.

"There should be no division in the body but its parts should have equal concern for each other".

Some final thoughts:

1. In softball if you only hit safely once in every three times at bat you are considered to be a success.
2. Every time you get up to bat you must put the past behind you. Each at bat is a new opportunity. In life that can be hard but we can learn from our experience, treasure the memories from our past but use them to fuel our future.
3. The best players cannot win without a good team around them. Let us all be team players! In the Body of Christ, we all have different strengths and talents. Let us use them in such a way that we continue to be the kind of community that God intends us to be!