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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y26
Evensong 26 – Readings: 8 Pent (Proper 10C)
Thursday 19 July 2018 Rugby Evensong

Deut. 30:9-14
Psalm 25:1-9
Luke 10:25-37

Why a Rugby Evensong?

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk. 10).

A year ago when Ellen Clark King, the Cathedral's Executive Pastor, and I heard that the World Seven's would be in San Francisco this summer we instantly knew what we had to do. We felt compelled to host a Rugby Evensong. Since then dozens of people have asked us "What is a rugby evensong?"

I need to begin by saying something about what evensong and rugby are. Evensong has a special meaning to the global English-speaking church. Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) and the other originators of this tradition imagined that profound daily worship should not just be for monks and nuns. They took the monastic service and shared it with everyone.

We love how Evensong especially values harmony, beauty, simplicity and humility. It is about the daily rhythm of our life, the movement from light and security into the perils of the dark. It is about the way God blesses every moment of our day, and our life, and even our death.

At first, rugby might seem like just a game that began around the time this Cathedral was founded in the middle of the nineteenth century. At Rugby School in England William Webb Ellis famously broke the rules and picked up the ball and started running. The game that grew from that act, involves moving an oblong ball up field by passing it backwards or laterally to your teammates as opponents try to stop the ball by tackling you.

Of course there is so much more to it than this. Rugby also includes kickoffs, rucks, line outs, scrums, kicking to touch, etc. The sport involves far less individual specialization than American football or baseball. As a result its players exhibit an impressive overall athleticism that makes it unique. Everyone on the field plays defense and can score. Every player has a high level of stamina, strength, speed and agility.

Rugby is a dangerous activity. It requires physical courage. This week we will be praying for players in the tournament and around the world. We will pray that all players will use the courage they learned on the field to make our world better.

This all brings us back to our original question. Why would Grace Cathedral host what might be the world's first Rugby Evensong? I have two answers.

First, in our mostly automated world rugby is one of the human endeavors that requires a total commitment of one's whole self. Every player on the pitch needs to maintain complete focus physically, emotionally and mentally. This makes it a kind of metaphor for the spiritual life. At no moment do we cease to be spiritual beings. To use a phrase from William James there are no moral holidays, our actions matter.

In our gospel reading tonight Jesus asks a young man to answer his own question about inheriting eternal life. To do this, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk. 10). Just as William Webb Ellis broke the rules to create something new and beautiful Jesus asks us to do the same. We are called to love our neighbors in ways that might upset how things are usually done.

Second, rugby in my experience is unique in its culture of fellowship and unity. In our society winning has become everything. Yesterday a *New York Times* reporter pointed out that this naturally leads to "toxic hostility" even toward youth game referees.¹ In rugby excellence matters but there is always a higher value.

I'm grateful to have been introduced into adulthood by older rugby players and coaches who understood how important this spirit of fellowship is. In my days as a player and coach we always hosted opposing teams for meals after the game. It was a chance to celebrate and socialize. After the best game of my life I remember meeting the player who had just broken my finger. His family owned a restaurant along Highway 80 and I always think of him when I drive past there.

This week Barak Obama gave a lecture on the centenary celebration of Nelson Mandela's birth.² He talked about the long road from colonialism and racism to a new world of democracy and human dignity. In these times of polarization and distrust rugby is part of how we overcome the greatest challenges of our time.

In the rhythm of my life I have become old enough so that I will probably never charge down the rugby pitch to make a tackle, or leap into the air to catch a lineout or kickoff,

or bury my head in the scrum. But I still dream of these things. More than ever before I have come to understand the darkness and perils of this life.

But I also have a greater appreciation for the power of humble people, for the way that simple human fellowship can drive away despair. And with every year, I grow in gratitude that through each moment God continues to preserve and nurture us.

¹ Bill Pennington, "Parents Behaving Badly: A Youth Sports Crisis Caught on Video," The New York Times, 18 July 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/18/sports/referee-parents-abuse-videos.html?emc=edit_sp_20180719&nl=sports&nlid=1350863320180719&te=1

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/17/world/africa/obama-speech-south-africa-transcript.html>