

## **GOAL!!!!**

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion on Labor Day Weekend  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
September 4, 2016  
Text: Philippians 3:12-16

My family can tell you I am not a sports person. I go to a baseball game because I like watching all the people, not the game. But, in spite of my sports ambivalence, I do have a few sports related memories. One of my favorites is riding home from our lake house on summer Sunday nights while my dad listened to the Pirates baseball game on the radio. It was fun to try and visualize what the announcers were describing. My dad must have felt the same way because he preferred listening to the games on the radio rather than watching them on television, often sitting out on the front porch long into the summer evenings listening to the Pirates win or lose.

The car rides home in the dark on those late summer nights were a long time ago now and I haven't listened to a sports game on the radio since. This makes it all the more remarkable that I know anything about Andres Cantor. You know about him too but you probably don't know his name. Andres Cantor is one of the most famous Spanish language sports broadcasters in the US, doing play by play first on the Univision network and then on Telemundo. Still don't know who he is? Okay, here's another hint. He's done play by play for several sports but he's most well-

known for his announcing of soccer matches. Any idea now who he is? Okay, here's the last hint – GOAL!!!!!!!

Now you know who he is, right?? Yes, he's the sports announcer who became famous for screaming GOAL during the FIFA World Cup in 1990. His popularity really took off during his enthusiastic play by play for the 1994 FIFA World Cup which took place in the US. Even I remember that. His shouting was so loud and crazy that it was on the regular news! People were just floored that this guy got so excited when a particular team scored that he screamed GOAL at the top of his lungs. What most folks here in the US didn't realize and I don't think I ever once heard it explained during all the news coverage, or when he made appearances on Letterman and The Late Show. The fact is screaming GOAL in such a loud, enthusiastic way had been the normal response to a goal in Latin America since the 1940's. So, really, what Andres Cantor was doing wasn't unusual at all. It just hadn't been done with US audiences before so people reacted like it was some bizarre new thing started by this one person in a moment of sheer joy and excitement for the love of the game. It wasn't. The truth is, Andres Cantor was just doing his job the way it would be done in his native country of Argentina. And folks here freaked out.

I've been thinking about Mr. Cantor and his screaming GOAL as I've been pondering this sermon since it's one of the few

if not the only time a sports metaphor appears in the bible. Paul actually talks about a goal as in a sports goal. “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal,” he says. Paul is using the popular Greek sport of foot races as a metaphor to explain that effort it takes to be a follower of Christ. He uses the incredible effort a runner has to make in the heat of a race as a way of describing how he keeps moving forward in responding to God’s call in spite of all the reasons there are to stop – “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal.” This business of following Christ is hard, he is saying. It takes real effort. It takes commitment. It takes concentration. It takes practice, lots and lots of practice. And it takes clarity on just what is the goal being pursued.

“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus,” he says. So for Paul, the goal is not to win the race, whatever the race is. The goal is not to beat out someone else, whoever or whatever that someone else might be. The goal is to press on for the prize and that prize is not money or fame or fortune or anything that comes along with those things the world values so much. The goal Paul is striving for, the goal Paul says all who follow Jesus are striving for, is answering the call of God to action, to faith-based response to the world around us. The call of God. That’s it. That’s what it’s all about. We are engaged in this

great competition and our prize for successfully negotiating the playing field called life is the call of God.

Well, that doesn't sound like much of a prize, we're thinking. Just what is this call of God in Christ Jesus? Call is a tricky thing, that's for sure. Call, that overwhelming sense of needing to do something, to respond in some way to a particular reality we face, is a foundational part of the Christian experience. But, all too often we just don't think about it that way. Call, we think, is something that happens to somebody else. Call is what happens when we have to hire a new pastor. Call is something that happens to a person who thinks he or she should *be* a pastor. Call isn't something that happens to me, we think. Or is it?

The truth is call is part of everyone's relationship with God. Theologian Frederick Buechner describes call this way: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." The place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. In other words, when you feel the most happy, the most fulfilled, the most connected to being who you want to be, look around and you'll find yourself in the place God needs you to be. And you know this. Instinctively you know this. Whatever gift you have, whatever gives you joy, that's a place to discover who it is God needs you to be in this world so much in need of love and healing, of mercy and justice. Praying, listening, cooking, talking, gardening, painting, cleaning, building,

helping, smiling, loving. All of these are gifts people have and the world needs. *You* have gifts the world needs. Yes, you.

Who me, some of you are thinking right now. I'm not special! God isn't calling me to anything! What could I do? What deep hunger does the world have that I could fill? Well, here's my suggestion for you. Don't think big. Think small. So often when we think about God and what God needs done in this crazy world we live in, we think of big things – like wars and global warming and the election wackiness and diseases and poverty and homelessness and so on and so on. All those things are important, and I believe – I hope to heaven actually – that God has called people to deal with those big things. But we aren't all called to respond to those big things! God doesn't expect us to take on more than we can handle. Those big goals don't have to be ours! But God does ask that we stretch beyond what we think we can do as we strain and stretch to be the people God is counting on us to be. The truth is, so often it is the little things, the little differences we can make, that mean the most, as we try to answer God's call as individuals and as a church.

I know this is true because I saw it here in our own church this past week. I witnessed firsthand multiple calls to multiple people exploding right here in this church on Thursday. Did these people see what they were doing as call or their response to a call from God? I don't know but I sort of doubt it. I doubt the piano

tuner and his cacophony felt like call to him or anyone else here while he was tuning the piano. But what he does is a real gift, a special and unique gift that could only come from God. So too, Dav's expertise in sorting through and filing all the sheet music our choir uses as he settles into the new office he has in the Music Room. And that room along with the library and the parlor are as beautiful as they are now because two hard-working ladies, Linda and Carolyn, decided they had a call to spruce things up a bit. They had the gift of vision of what it could be and they did it with funding from Women's Fellowship itself a product of the efforts of so many in fund-raising events. So too with Gary's work painting and cleaning up around the building this summer and with Ed's work always showing up just when something needs doing. So too with Carol, Deb and Vera who answered my call for help in cleaning up the Sunday School rooms to get ready for this fall. So too with Claire and Sandi and the dedicated, ever expanding group of folks working on the Pollinator Garden and Labyrinth project. Call and response to call is exploding around us and it's pretty darned exciting to see.

Dear friends, each and every one of these things is a response to God's call, whether you knew it or not. All those times when you feel like, "I just need to" or "I really should [fill in the blank]" – that's a nudge from God that you're the help needed in the moment. Now let me stop right there and explain that every time

you wonder if you should do something is NOT God pushing. Heavens no! We'd all have nervous breakdowns in a matter of days if that was the case. What I'm talking about is those moments when you just know – *you just know* – you're supposed to do a particular thing. Check on your neighbor. Call someone you haven't heard from in awhile. Pitch in with a particular task at church or somewhere else. *You just know*. That just knowing part – that's God. Figuring it out to begin with – that's God too. And that's what Paul is trying to explain. Keep trying to figure it out, he says. Keep trying to figure out what God needs you to do, what God needs this church to do. Work at it. Strain toward it. Reach for it, especially when the going gets tough.

But do realize one thing as you're straining and stretching toward the future here at church or in your own life. When you finally accomplish something, you won't hear some heavenly voice screaming GOAL! If only it were that simple! Usually it's difficult to know when we're on the right track with something we think God is inviting us to do. That's when we have to remind each other that all God is asking us to do – as individuals and as a community – all God is asking us to do is to try to reach that goal out there before us, to be the church God needs us to be – that beacon of hope we have always claimed to be in our fragile, hurting world. Challenges lie ahead, no doubt. But so does deep gladness as we try to figure out together where our love, our joy,

our compassion can meet the world's deep hunger and need. That is our call. That is our challenge. That is our future just as it has been our past. What more do we need to know? Amen.