

"Fought the Good Fight, Finished the Race, Kept the Faith"

Rev. Allison Stokes

In this message I speak of the death on September 1, 1989 of baseball commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti, at age 51. The man was a hero of mine because of his personal integrity and truth-telling. I believe that the influence on American life and culture of "baseball's designated thinker" is more profound than we know. The occasion was the Hartford Seminary Monday morning chapel service on October 30, 1989, two days before All Saints' Day.

I begin by telling a story that Sally, a school bus driver, told me. Last week Sally found Jason, a second-grader, standing at the back of the bus. Blue paint was spilled all over the floor. Blue paint was all over his hands. "I didn't do it," he told her. Sally spoke with Jason about the importance of truth-telling. "I *didn't* do it," he continued to insist as he exited the bus. Sally was angry: it took her a long time to scrub that blue paint off her bus floor.

The next day Jason got onto the bus carrying a pencil drawing that he handed to Sally. It showed a school bus with Sally in the driver's seat and Jason spilling the paint. Written on it in phonetic spelling were the words "I'm S A R E."

This drawing of Jason's, I think, is extremely significant. Here is a child able, finally, to confess "I did it," and to repent "I'm sorry."

At about the time this scene was playing out in Massachusetts, another scene was playing out in North Carolina last week. The Rev. Jim Bakker was sentenced to 45 years in federal prison for fraud, for cheating people who trusted him. We were all appalled that throughout his trial and sentencing the man refused to take responsibility for his criminal behavior, to confess his guilt, to say "I did it."

Denials like Bakker's have become all too familiar to us. In recent years a number of prominent public figures --heroes-- have boldly proclaimed their innocence, denied ANY wrongdoing, when, in fact, hard facts suggest otherwise. Most notable examples are Oliver North in the world of politics and Pete Rose in the world of sports. This total refusal to claim personal

responsibility, to tell the truth --"Yes, I did it"-- is alarming to all of us concerned about the moral education of young people.

To this day these people-- Bakker, North, Rose-- are STILL heroes. Despite sanctions imposed for their crimes, they are admired. I shudder at the influence on kids. The message seems to be: when lots of money is at stake, when a reputation is at stake, when the future is at stake, deny, deny. "I didn't do it."

This is why I find Jason's wonderful drawing so important. Jason makes a picture of himself spilling the paint: "I did it" and then repents: "I'm sare." Jason in his young years is farther advanced in the moral conduct of life and in a sense of personal integrity than the heroes: Jim Bakker, Ollie North, Pete Rose. Jason's confession of truth and repentance of wrong-doing took courage.

I've been thinking a lot about truth-telling, personal integrity and courage since the death of A. Bartlett Giamatti. I was in Knoxville, Tennessee for my sister's wedding when it occurred. I'll never forget it. I was in a motel room at 5:10 on Friday afternoon when the news came over T.V. Less than two hours before the baseball commissioner had been stricken by a massive heart attack while vacationing on Martha's Vineyard. He was dead.

I was devastated. Bart Giamatti dead at 51. The entire wedding weekend, it kept coming back to me. I couldn't put it out of my mind. I felt the loss deeply, personally. Most of my family was puzzled: how did you know the baseball commissioner for heaven's sake? I explained that during the many years I was a graduate student, then a chaplain at Yale, Bart was President. "The baseball commissioner, President of *Yale University*?" a young nephew asked incredulously.

Yes, this career move had certainly baffled people --faculty, friends, students--at the time. Bart's predecessor, Kingman Brewster, had gone on to become Ambassador to Great Britain. How could Bart go from being head of an Ivy university to being head of American baseball? His decision to do that had been one reason why I respected the man so. He did what he had to

do, what his heart and soul told him was right for him. It didn't matter much to him what people thought.

I didn't know Bart Giamatti well, but we had run into one another on a number of occasions. The most memorable for me was the March 30, 1986 Easter service when we sat together in the chancel of Battell Chapel. When I got up to speak, he leaned over and whispered, "Give 'em hell." With this outrageous-- and gracious-- gesture, I felt welcomed as one of the guys.

After Bart's death a report in *USA Today* noted that he put his family and religion first, before anything. I wouldn't have put it quite that way. He was an "Easter Christian"-- that's the only time he came to university chapel. But he was a profoundly moral, ethical man. He was a man like Martin Luther, who when examined about his protest against abuses in the Roman Catholic church declared, "Here I stand. I can do no other."

In anticipation of Reformation Day tomorrow and All Saints Day Wednesday, I remember Bart Giamatti. I remember him with reverence as the kind of character saints are made of.

I recall reading the *Berkshire Eagle's* banner headlines on Thursday, August 24th, 1989, "Rose Reportedly to Accept Suspension." Just nine days later, on Saturday, September 2nd, the headline, "Giamatti, 51, Dies of Heart Attack." News stories warned us not to connect the two events-- the suspension of Rose and the death. They said that Giamatti wouldn't want us to do that. But I cannot help but do so. In my mind the conflict with Pete Rose, which had dragged on since February, cost Bart his life.

I know he was a chain smoker. I know the autopsy revealed he had had previous, so-called "silent" heart attacks. Even so, the stress of his struggle with Pete Rose must have been enormous. A man of conscience and integrity, Giamatti called it as he saw it.

A 225-page investigation report concluded not only that Rose had bet on baseball, but also that he had bet on his own team. Despite the fact Rose admitted NO wrong-doing, Giamatti

said publicly that he thought Rose was guilty. In effect, Giamatti called this sports hero, this idol of young people, a liar.

Bart took a stand for truth-telling and personal responsibility. He did so at great personal cost. He did so for the game he loved: baseball. It was said that he was concerned for baseball's image. But it was much more than that. A. Bartlett Giamatti took a stand not just for the integrity of American baseball, but for the integrity of American life and culture. He took a courageous stand against the lack of truth-telling that can become a way of life. He took a courageous stand against the denial of personal responsibility for wrong-doing that we've become accustomed to in leaders.

The forces of untruth and evil are powerful. Bart's stand for truth and good cost him his life. I'm convinced of it. He "fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith." And we have ALL gained. I believe that for him, "there is a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award (him) on that Day." [II Timothy 4:7-8]

Bart Giamatti died prematurely, yet in his stand against corruption, he is destined to achieve a certain immortality in the world of sports. This makes great sense to us who believe that life, goodness, and truth **will** prevail over death, evil, and deception.