

The Spirit of the Game

Acts 2:1-21 (John 20:19-23)

The Day of Pentecost

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So, a week or two ago, I received my copy of the alumni magazine from Luther College. And there among the usual updates on which professors got tenure, which classmates got married, or had a child, or did something unusual or remarkable, was a feature story on the latest sport craze sweeping Luther's campus: Ultimate. Are you familiar with this? It's sometimes called Ultimate Frisbee (which think they now downplay because there is not necessarily an affiliation with trademarked Frisbee name), the basic idea sounds almost ridiculously simple: you throw the Frisbee, sorry—the disc!—to each other and score for your team by catching the disc in the opponent's end zone. Ultimate incorporates various elements of soccer, football, and basketball, the article says, but is still entirely unique.

Practitioners of Ultimate can be pretty philosophical about the sport itself as well as the effect that paying on an ultimate team has had on them. First of all, most ultimate players will proudly claim that there is no off-season. Maybe they train and play indoors in the winter, but it's a year-round endeavor. Said one Luther athlete, "Ultimate has been a driving force in teaching me that college is more than just the classes and the degree, but also about the relationships. Some of the relationships I've made [playing ultimate] remain the strongest and most important in my life." Maybe that's not so unique, not so unusual, something that *could* happen to people devoted to any sport—as well as in drama or choir or orchestra, or in a fraternity or sorority. But this athlete continues that he now seeks out what he calls "Ultimate-type relationships" in all areas of life. "Both the sport of Ultimate itself and the people I played with taught me to be search honestly for what I love, and I hope to always live true to that." Another player suggests that the *particular* type of camaraderie Ultimate creates has caused her to think a lot more about fostering mutual growth within a team, rather than competing with teammates for playing time. She said that this can be applied to other aspects of life where, you can find yourself working to make sure everyone develops to their full potential.

Perhaps the thing that makes ultimate stand out the most, though, is that unlike most sports Ultimate does not use any referees and instead relies on something that ultimate players call "The Spirit of the Game" or SOTG. SOTG means that players themselves are responsible for calling fouls, out-of-bounds plays, and other rule violations. If teams disagree on a call, they work it out. "The goal is to be as respectful as possible," "You don't have to be a pushover," another athlete chimes in, "but you have to be honest."

The Spirit of the Game tends to weed out those athletes who would be tempted to play with a win-at-all-costs mentality or those who would put scoring points ahead of a clean, congenial game. That doesn't mean that teams aren't competitive, but most players agree that in ultimate winning is less important than integrity, love of the game, and community. Ultimate players quoted in this article said things like this: "Our hope is that our team would embody the spirit of Ultimate, which is self-officiating, being honest, being relaxed, [while] also playing good a good game and making all these friends."

There is something very reminiscent of the Holy Spirit's arrival at Pentecost in Ultimate's reliance on the Spirit of the Game. In fact, I invite you to take a leap of imagination with me. Let's just put out there this hypothesis: what if the ultimate players call Spirit of the Game is the spirit of the living God, spirit of the risen Christ, the very same Holy Spirit poured out on the people. Now, I'm not looking to spin a full theological treatise on the Holy Spirit, based on Ultimate Frisbee. This is not the Pneumatology according to Wham-O! But what if we were to consider the Spirit poured out at Pentecost in light of the Spirit of the Game?

First, it's about relationships. It's about Community. We're told that the disciples were all together in one place, waiting, as commanded by the risen Christ, for the Spirit—the promised advocate, counselor and comforter—to arrive. This encounter with the Spirit of the living God, the on-going presence of the risen Christ, this Spirit came to the people at a time when they had gathered together. When they were all in the same place, of the same mind, united around a common purpose.

There is a no-cut policy. Everyone has something to offer. Everyone has gifts to share. I think that could not be more apparent this Pentecost, as we celebrate the baptism of a three-month old, a five-month old and a two-year old, celebrate the Spirit's outpouring on Harper, Harvey and Beau, whose gifts we have yet to fully discover, whose place in the great big tapestry of faith we call the Christ the King, or the even bigger jigsaw puzzle that is the wider people of God can't be fully known yet—these three will be sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Everyone has something to offer. At the same time, we celebrate with those among us who are graduating high school, marking this milestone in their education and formation, as well as a new chapter in their lives—including their lives of faith. They enter the workforce, join the military or go off to college having already shared many of their gifts with us, but with as much or even more of their giftedness still waiting to be discovered, waiting to be shared. Everyone has something to offer. And of course, today we celebrate those many and wonderful gifts that Carol Hokel has shared with us from that very organ bench over the past thirty years, celebrating with her and

thanking God for the gift she has been to this community of faith as she's shared her gifts for music, worship leadership, faith and love these three decades.

Of course, like Ultimate's Spirit of the Game, the mark of the spirit that was breathed into the community of Jesus' followers at Pentecost is in so many ways self-led, self-coached, self-regulated. We rely on one another, on the gifts we each bring to our common work, trusting that God has given us enough of each of the different gifts, strengths, talents, skills, outlooks, experiences, and vision to do what God is calling us to do together here—as a team. Not that there isn't a particular role for pastors, for council presidents, for church staff, for team leaders and committee chairs. But there is something for each of us to do—and we don't need to wait for so-called experts either from within our congregation or from the larger church to tell us what to do. We are each gifted by the same holy spirit, and those gifts, once recognized, unpacked, and put together are sufficient for whatever it is that God is calling us to be or to do together. Put differently, the spirit helps us discover that our common life, like that of an ultimate Frisbee team, ought to be about fostering mutual growth, having everyone live up to their full potential—not just about maximizing our own individual playing time, nor “beating the competition” at all costs.

Because in so many ways, our overall goal is to embody the Spirit of the Game—the Spirit of Pentecost. To live a life marked by the presence of God's uncontrolled and uncontrollable spirit, a spirit that is often active in places we may least expect, as often as not among people we wouldn't normally think capable of such giftedness. God's spirit often shows up in spite of our careful planning, our brilliant marketing, our innovative programming. God's spirit helps us do unusual, unexpected, at times risky and even dangerous things, all in order to empower proclamation. Like the disciples who speak fluently in languages they've never studied, the Spirit's gifts are not given to them out of entitlement, they're not given to make them feel special. In fact, their gifts aren't given for them at all—they are given simply to multiply the ways to praise God. The disciples speak in different languages in order to be understood by their hearers. The increased ability to speak, or sing, or play or present the Gospel in ways that people in our rapidly changing world can understand is not part of a branding scheme or marketing plan for attracting potential members. It is itself a sign of the Holy Spirit, an outpouring of the power of God, through which these ordinary believers like Peter and the eleven, like Harper, Harvey and Beau, like Carol and our seniors, and you all and me are moved to proclaim what God is doing right now in the lives of God's people.

See, as we embody more fully the Spirit of the Game, we come to see realize that God's Spirit is **not** poured out for the sake of the believers, but for the sake of the world around them. We like to talk about Pentecost being the birthday of

the church, but the problem with that is that it makes us look *back to the past* rather than *forward to the future*. Pentecost is a celebration of God's spirit being poured out over and over and over again in order to bring about a particular future for God's world. Can we feel that Spirit empowering us to take risks, to try new things, to reach out to new people, using new languages to share the good news we ourselves have heard?

This is the—wait for it—the Ultimate Gift of the Risen Christ, to breathe the Spirit into his gathered people. To pour out that Spirit right here, right now. The Spirit that is uncontrollable, that shows up where we least expect it, that empowers proclamation, that stirs us up to make Jesus' mission our own—not for our sake, for the sake of the world. That, for us as the Christ's people in this time and place is the spirit of the game. That's what makes this particular game life-changing and meaningful. . Amen.