

# The Hardest Thing

John 18:33-37 | 11/25/2018

The sports writers at USA Today (March 3, 2003) put their heads together to list what, in their opinion, were the 10 hardest things to do in sports.

10. Skiing the alpine downhill race at 80 mph.
  9. Saving a penalty kick in soccer.
  8. Bicycling the Tour de France covering 2,114 miles.
  7. Running a marathon.
  6. Landing a quadruple toe loop on figure skates — with grace.
  5. Returning a 130-140 mph tennis serve.
  4. Hitting a golf ball straight and long.
  3. Pole vaulting.
  2. Driving a race car while enduring 5 G's in the corners in 120 degree heat, knowing a mistake can kill you.
- And number 1 is hitting a major-league baseball pitch thrown at 90 plus mph by judging it in 1/1,000th of a second. If you can pull it off successfully three out of 10 times you'll land a multimillion dollar contract.

Sports feats are difficult. No doubt. They take endurance, skill, training and talent, but ultimately they aren't that important. After all, athletic competitions, even the world championships, are just games. Life itself is considerably harder and much more challenging.

So what's the hardest thing to do in life? Here's a list of life's 10 challenging events that require daring, hope, talent and skill. Keep in mind that what is number 10 for you may be number one for your neighbors. We all have our own personal challenges that would make our list look different, but here is a list of some major challenges:

10. Raising children.
9. Giving forgiveness.
8. Apologizing.
7. Loving your enemy.
6. Quitting cigarettes, getting sober, abandoning an addiction.
5. Regaining the lost trust of loved ones.
4. Keeping faith in God amidst trials and tribulations.
3. Living homeless.
2. Burying a child.
1. Removing hospital life support for a loved one.

This list makes the complicated judgments involved in skiing at 80 mph, pole vaulting and hitting a baseball look easy.

The life list is a tough list, but that last one — making decisions about life or death — is one of the toughest. Even when the choice is obvious, it is a tremendously agonizing decision to remove a respirator from a loved one. You've become the judge. You're going to decide between life and death.

Is this kind of stuff in your job description? Is it what you expect in life? Probably not.

It was in Pontius Pilate's job description. As Governor of the Province of Judea for Rome he was always making serious choices, yet at the same time he is, for us, a sort of everyman. He was troubled in difficult situations just as we are when he tried to resist certain pressures, listen to his spouse, have courage, recognize goodness, then make a choice. He did well for nearly 11 years. The Samaritan Uprising in the year 36 was his undoing. He made a wrong choice. The result? He was exiled to Gaul (Vienne-on-Rhone) in shame and disgrace, committing suicide there in 38.

Pilate was good at keeping the peace. But keeping the peace isn't always the same as doing what's right. Sometimes keeping the peace is just the opposite of doing what's right. Sometimes we choose not to apologize. Sometimes we choose not to forgive. At what cost this peace — at home, at work or at play?

Sometimes peace, as the world defines it, is the wrong choice. Sometimes it's better to take the risk.

Did Pilate lose sight of what was important? Do we?

It was just another workday for Pilate when Jesus showed up. One can imagine Pilate dropping whatever he was doing, then going to see this criminal brought to his court. It's just another day of the week to keep the peace. Just another life to judge. Ask questions, listen, weigh the evidence, then decide. Live or die.

The governor may have smirked at the irony of the circumstances — a captured, bound man accused of claiming kingship. A powerless peasant, really. An unarmed Jew from the underclass. Pilate asks, “Are you a king?” It’s a question he may not have been asking seriously. He probably did not take the matter of Christ’s kingship as seriously as we do on Christ the King Sunday.

On the face of it, it’s a preposterous question. Obviously, to Pilate, Jesus was not a king. He had no army. He had no city. He had no funding. No robes. No weapons. He had nothing. He was nothing.

Jesus responds to Pilate’s question with an unexpected question of his own. “Governor,” says Jesus, “why ask your question? Do you think I am a king, or were you told I am a king?”

Pilate may have wondered, “Is this stupidity, insolence or strength?” But he plays the situation with humor and skill — it is, after all, just a game to him. With slight irritation and perhaps a smirk, he replies, “How should I know? Am I one of your people? Your people, your leaders, brought you here to me.” Then getting to the serious point, he asks, “What have you done?” The expectation of the most powerful man in Judea, the representative of Emperor Tiberius, is that Jesus will answer directly. Jesus does not. Instead he replies that he is a king, but from another world.

Ahhhh. Another world. Hmmm. A game is afoot. This amusing man is harmless. So Pilate displays some sportsmanship. Jesus is no threat. The peace is kept. There’s no justification for killing him. It’s an easy choice. But at the end of this little interview, Pilate rhetorically asks Jesus, “What is truth?”

What is truth? Truth for Pilate was being politic. It’s not a serious question. It’s an unimportant and dismissive question. It’s a game question. It’s a sports question. It’s a question like “Who’s gonna’ win the race tonight? Who’s going to win the gold?” But there is another answer, because there is such a thing as godly truth, as opposed to gaming truth.

As it was, Pilate had godly truth standing in front of him, but he was so distracted by playing the game of keeping his post and keeping the peace that he missed it. He loses his footing, he drops the ball, he strikes out — because in making the wrong choice about Jesus, he loses power and he ultimately loses his life.

Jesus, the gospels tell us — is the way, the truth and the life. That’s the truth that Pilate missed in his gamesmanship. It may be that we, too, miss this truth when we become so pressured by difficult choices that we forget, or never notice, that Christ is standing within us, beside us and among us as he told us he would. In life we are not abandoned. God is present always.

It’s in the hard places in our lives that we must ask the tough questions while seeking godly truth. Then we should listen to the answers, weigh the evidence, judge and act — just like Pilate. Only let our choices be truth-seeking, not game-playing.

In the end, Pilate gave Jesus over to the whims of the furious rabble. He did the politically expedient thing. He kept the peace. Maybe he prevented a riot. He believed he had done the right thing.

That’s where Pilate and the rest of us are similar. When we are presented with life’s difficult choices we may choose to be expedient rather than do what is ultimately right. Making the right choice isn’t always easy or popular. But is it Christian? That’s the most important question.

So what’s the hardest thing for you? Is it learning to forgive when you are hurt? Apologizing when you would rather not? Raising your children with love, kindness and direction every day, tirelessly? Loving your enemies, both personal and national? These acts take hope and courage and are more challenging than anything in sports.

But we’re going to face them. No doubt about it. That’s what life is all about.

Yet, God expects us to step into the batter’s box. And swing.

*Pastor Keith*