

“Pull Me Out of the Game, Coach!”

Rev. Jonathan Taylor Haley

Editor’s Note: The heart of the Transforming Center’s mission and ministry is the two-year Transforming Community experience in which pastors and ministry leaders enter into a rhythm of eight quarterly retreats designed for the care of their own souls. In this article, Jonathan Taylor Haley, Senior Pastor at First Presbyterian Church LaCrosse, WI shares what the Transforming Community experience has meant to him. You don’t see too many football metaphors in spiritual formation literature, so enjoy!

It was my son Hudson’s last football game of the year. The Black Knights had gone undefeated all season, and now they were in the semi-finals for the city championship -- playing under the lights with an announcer, fireworks, trophies...the works. Heady stuff for a 5th grader - maybe more so for Dad.

Hudson had grown in his skills during the season, often making tackles in the backfield and pressuring the quarter back into incomplete passes. Midway through this championship game Hudson had two off-sides calls against him. The way the calls were handled was confusing to him and no one explained the problem. It is always hard for a young man to learn to control that competitive drive – even harder when it seems that he is being penalized unfairly. As a dad, I could see the frustration welling up within Hudson.

It was 4th and one on the goal line. The ball was snapped. Collisions occurred. Hudson held his ground and made the stop! The referee in position said “No touchdown!” while the referee out of position called it a “touchdown.” After the referees conferred, a touchdown was awarded to the opposing team.

Frustration burned across Hudson's face and oozed out in tears. I could only stand on the sidelines hoping that Hudson would get pulled out of the game so I could give him what he needed. I couldn't yell it onto the field – for it would embarrass him if he was able to hear it at all. And the coach didn't know my son well enough to meet his need in that moment.

Fortunately, after they received the kick the defensive line left the field. On the side lines I could reach my son. Pulling him aside, I asked him if I could talk to him and he agreed. Gently putting my hands on his cheeks, I turned his face towards mine. I wanted my face to be the only face he saw. In that moment the game, the fans, and other teammates weren't important. Hudson needed to be called back to who he was.

We need that, too, sometimes.

As pastors we sometimes need to be called back to who we are, but unfortunately there is usually no one to pull us out of the game. To make matters worse we feel the need play both defense and offense. And by the way, special teams as well. In the heat of ministry we take a lot of shots, become exhausted, and get wounded by others. We've become good at masking our anger, frustration and white hot tears. We need someone to pull us out of the game.

While God waits patiently to minister to us, we busy ourselves with meetings, church self-help books, damage control, sermon prep, and endless other tasks. We continue to do the best we can, but there isn't much to draw from and we lose our focus. We don't become wounded healers, but rather wounded wounders! We suffer and the Church suffers.

If we continue to "minister" in this way, we will get taken out of the game, but it won't be pretty. Heart attacks, addictions, infidelity, financial indiscretion, burn out, and other tragedies will sideline us – but when it happens this way, our chances of getting put back in the game decrease.

For me, the discipline of quarterly retreats with the Transforming Center has become a necessary trip to the sidelines. This is where I am guided into God's presence. This is where I can sense God placing his hands on my cheeks, gently cupping my face so that I can't look at my fans or my detractors, my blackberry, my family, the web, the latest church self-help book, or anything else. On retreat I can only look into the face of a God who loves me and reminds me of who I am in Him (not what others want me to be), who hears my confession and offers forgiveness, who offers wisdom, who gives me life and life abundantly.

Is it your turn to stand at the sidelines so that God can draw you to himself and tell you what you most need to hear? Do you know how to recognize when it is time to say "Pull me out, Coach"? Will you allow God the time and space to nurture and fill you? ...to

call you his beloved and call you back to who you are in Him? I encourage you to join me in creating those places where God can bear you up and ready you to return to the game. Only then will the best you have to offer benefit the church, your family and God's kingdom.

In case you were wondering, Hudson went back in and played a great game, forcing a turnover that ended the game with a victory.

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