

“Hang In There”

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I had a sermon all written by Thursday, but you all know - if you know me at all - where I was this weekend: I was watching the NFL draft. [Laughter] Now usually, see, why I like the draft so much is because everyone is a winner on draft day, because nobody has lost anything yet, and if the world is all open, it's your oyster - because that one guy who gets picked will make the difference, to finally beat up on those Green Bay Packers, even more than usual. [Laughter.] What an exciting year! But, this year, for one of the first times, the Vikings actually did well, so we kind of picked at the end of the round, and it wasn't all that exciting. And, like usual, they picked somebody with a bad history, and then they picked a lineman - and they are not interesting or fun to get excited about.

So, I was kind of looking for another story line - and there was one big one - and if you follow the draft you know what I'm talking about: It is the story of two brothers, one of them named Shaquill and one named Shaquem. They are twins. Their last name is Griffin and they are from Florida. These two boys were just a bundle of energy,

I think if you have two football players in the family, a mother should get a special gift from God - because I can't imagine how hyper these two little guys were all the way along. But Shaquem was about two minutes younger than his brother and when he came out there was a problem: The umbilical had wrapped around his wrist. So, when he was born all the blood flow was gone and his hand was almost not developed at all. So, by the age of four, it was so gnarled and [he was] in so much pain, the little guy just wanted it off, and so finally the doctors decided they were going to amputate. So, they amputated his left hand right at the wrist.

That didn't stop him, because he and his brother did everything together, and one wasn't going to stop the other one. They loved football and played, whether it was in Pee Wee league, which went into Junior High, and even in High School, and every step along the way - there was always a coach who would say, “You can't play. You only have one hand.” Well, that was not what Shaquem was going to do, and his older brother by two minutes, Shaquill, wasn't going to play unless Shaquem was on his team. Shaquill was so good that these coaches, no matter if it was Pee Wee League or Junior High or High School, they wanted Shaquill so bad they said, “Alright, we will let him play. Suit up.”

Then they found that Shaquem could actually play with one hand, surprising them at every level. So, when they got to college, Shaquill - the older one by two minutes - was so amazing that he was one of the top prospects in the entire country, and, being from Florida, those darn Gators offered him a scholarship. Florida State offered him a scholarship. Even the U. of Miami offered him one. Everybody. Alabama wanted him and he [Shaquill] said, “Well, are you going to give a scholarship to my brother?” “Well, he has one hand.” And, “No. Well, I'm not going.” Then he turned everybody down.

Finally, little Central Florida decided that, “Hey, he is so good it might be worth two scholarships. So, they let his brother get a scholarship, and they [the brothers] went on and played ball together in college. What a surprise, when they found out his one-armed brother wasn't bad. Now his older brother by two minutes, Shaquill, was so good that he went on

and played for three years. And, the first time the pros wanted him, and he was drafted by the Seattle Sea Hawks. It was a joyous celebration, but it was also a little awkward because the two brothers had never been apart for even a day, and they wondered what they were going to do. So, Shaquill went off and played and had an amazingly great rookie year and he kept sending money back to his brother, so he [Shaquem] wouldn't have to work quite so hard at a job that he couldn't really have, so he could continue to play football and try to make life work.

But, this was a great Cinderella story because Shaquem, with the one hand, was on the Central Florida football team and they went undefeated this year, in the entire nation. They didn't get to win the National Championship, because they weren't just in one of the big top five conferences. I sure wish they had been able to play Alabama or somebody [like that] for that National Championship game.

But what happens now? Shaquem graduated from college. No more football. He wanted to play in the pros and he was an amazing athlete, but no one offered him a thing. He couldn't even get into the Rookie Combine, which is in Indianapolis. The Rookie Combine is where all of the coaches get together and all of the scouts, and they time these guys and they check their weight, and how high they can jump and how many times they can bench-press 250 pounds. They didn't even invite him because, why would you even invite a one-handed guy?

Except that this one-handed guy promised that he could do better than any other linebacker in the history of the game. It was kind of a cute human-interest story. So, at the very last minute, they let Shaquem in to the rookie camp to try out, so everyone could see that a one-armed guy was a cute story, even all the way through college and God bless him - but he was never going to get drafted.

So, the first day they figured, "OK. How in the world is he going to bench-press with one hand? Those brothers there set it all up. They had a block - one hand on the bar and a block around the other hand. Then he put his hand - or his nub - on that box, and that is how he benched. Now, if any of you have bench-pressed, you know that after about 2-3 times and, I'm sorry, at my height and weight, 250 pounds, more than 5-6 times is rough. He cranked out as many or more times as any other linebacker there - *balancing* his nub on a box and the other hand going up and down. It was amazing. Everybody applauded. They were impressed.

OK, that was kind of a neat trick. He was really a good athlete, for somebody with one hand.

So, they line him up and they do the 40-yard dash. Now his brother, who is in the defensive backfield for the Seattle Sea Hawks, ran a 43.8. You run a 43-anything and you can be a wide-receiver in this league. You can be a defensive back. You are fast as a little guy. Now Shaquem is bigger than his brother and he weighs about 30-40 pounds more than his brother. Because he is a linebacker, he got up, put his hand - his good hand - down; his nub is over here [Scott motions], and he took off and ran that 40-yard dash at the same speed as his brother: 43.8.

No one in the history of the NFL, at the linebacker position, had run that fast.

So, the day of the draft comes and they weren't sure where he would go, or if he would go. It's one thing for a team to say that is really great, but it is another thing to say, you know,

you are going to play with one hand. Now this is somebody who had like 11 or 12 sacks. (I should have looked that up before I got up here.) He even had two interceptions - think about that - with one hand. Now if I had a hand that was that big, I think I could catch the ball with one hand, too [laughter]; especially with those stick-um gloves they use now. He was amazing.

So, the day came, and he knew he wasn't going to get picked in the first round. He knew he wasn't going to get picked in the second round, or probably not even in the third round; but because he was a human-interest story, he sat there in the green room and everybody could watch him. He had his whole family there and they were having a party while everyone else was sweating out where they going to get picked. It didn't matter that at the end of day one if nobody picked him; he was still sitting there looking good.

Day 2 he was sitting there - and a camera on them - and he didn't look upset. He was just happy to be there. Day 3 - finally - in the fourth round he didn't get picked, but he got picked in the fifth round, and it was so neat because the one team that picked him - and it wasn't out of any kind of feeling sorry for him, because it was in the fifth round of a seven-round draft - was the Seattle Sea Hawks. A one in thirty-two chance that he would play with his brother, and when that was announced, he and his brother hugged and they cried like little babies. It was the neatest moment.

But, that isn't even the best part of this story. The best part is [that] one of the commentators stuck a mic in his face and said, "What are you going to say to all of those people who didn't believe in you?" And, he kind of looked at her and he said, "That's not the question. The question is: How am I going to honor everyone who did believe in me?"

That was beautifully said - and now as much as it grieves my heart I'm going to have to root for that AFC stinking Seattle Sea Hawk team. [Laughter.] Yes, I know there are Seattle people here in this room. [Applause!]

What I gleaned from that was, that he abided in his brother. Shaquill would not - he gave up so much for his brother - but he wouldn't have been able to live his life happily, without supporting his brother, each and every step along the way. He abided by a principle that was so meaningful: He abided a life with his brother.

In that passage that I read from John 15, it talks over and over again about abiding in God. And, God abided in Jesus - trusted him (abiding means to trust), abiding that Jesus would abide by the Disciples. We abide in God and God abides in us in a unique and powerful way; sacrificing, willing to give and to let go of, because to abide in something, means to make it a priority.

We use that word now to "abide" by the law, to "abide" by a principle, but to "abide" in our faith, by being willing to sacrifice the things that are not as important, in order to stand for the things that are. When you abide in your Church, you have to sacrifice your Sunday morning's sleep. [Laughter.] You laugh, but some people are not willing to abide. They would rather sleep in than abide with God. When you are a person of faith, you abide by sacrificing a portion of your income so that other people can receive the abundance of what God has, through using a portion of your money.

If you are not a person of faith, they cannot understand why you would abide by that. The thousands of dollars that you put aside to put into your general budget account that you give to the Church every year is foolishness to so many people. Why isn't that in your kid's college fund? Why isn't that extra money set aside for your 401K? Why isn't that extra money used to take trips, because you work so hard, you should take that extra money and use it on yourself.

But when you abide by a principle greater than yourself, you are willing to sacrifice. You're willing to say that something is greater than me; that something is more important. "That I abide by something more powerful than me and my needs." That is what you do every time you are here on Sunday morning.

That is what these new members have said when they have said, "I am going to join this congregation." That they abide in God. And, abiding by God means, "I put that above so many other things in this world and in this life. I'm willing to sacrifice for it. I'm willing to denounce a certain part of my income. I'm willing to denounce a certain number of extra moments of sleep. I'm willing to put up with going to different things that maybe I'm not even that interested in, but I do it because it nurtures God's ministry in this world, and that's what I abide by."

It is so important, because we do a heck of a lot of funerals here and I bet I can count on one hand how many times somebody has said, "Gee, I really respect grandpa or grandma because they got to sleep in on Sunday mornings," I don't ever remember anyone saying, "I really abide in them. I really respected them because they took all of these trips." But, *over* and *over* again, I hear grandchildren tearfully talking about the example that their now newly deceased grandfather or grandmother - the inspiration that they left them. Over and over again I hear it: "That they sacrificed for us, they sacrificed for their Church, they sacrificed for their community."

And, another word for that is, "I have so much respect for the way they *abided* by me. The way they abided in what they believed about God through Jesus Christ. That, that was the most important thing - and they *lived* it. And I could *see* it in them." Over and over again, when I walk away from a funeral, almost all of the time I sit down and I go, "I hope that when I have said my last breath, and that little stinker that is in my daughter's womb right now - that comes out in August - that years from now will say, 'Boy, my grandma and grandpa abided in God. They were such an example for me about how to live, and how to struggle, how to sacrifice - and I learned my faith from them.'"

That is the bond together - in a story about abiding - in what is truly important. And, every time you come to Church; every time you show up and clean on a Saturday morning when you could have been cleaning your own place; every time you offer something in the plate or make a pledge, or give to the Foundation; or, anytime you are involved to learn more about your faith in a Sunday School class; or you give to a shelter meal; or, this past week when we had people every night staying here for Family Promise, so that homeless families could stay together - your grandchildren are watching, or the ones you will have in the future, and they are learning what it means to abide in a faith, and in a life that is greater than you. Let us just pray that we have that ability to share, to sacrifice, and to abide, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.