

You all know, I have my deep sports feels. It's an innate part of who I am, and with that identity comes certain *expectations* when it comes to how one must operate as a legit fan. Don't talk to me about loyalty and commitment unless you're willing to stick it out and watch your team even through dry spells and throngs of losing seasons. But one of my biggest sports pet peeves is when fans leave the game early. It drives me insane. Like it legitimately makes me want to scream a little bit, because I get it, you can beat all the traffic and if the game is out of hand you can get home a little bit early, and who wants to sit around to watch a losing effort anyway? And yet, my answer to that question is: YOU!! A diehard fan sticks around. A diehard fan stays to the bitter end, no matter what that end looks like.

As I was thinking about this, two polar opposite experiences came to mind. The first was one that happened to me directly. I had gone to a Tigers game with one of my friend's families and it turned into a long game. The game was tied and it had gone into extras and since I wasn't in charge of this group, or really a part of it at all, I was simply along for the ride, I didn't get a say or feel like I could speak up when in the 10<sup>th</sup> inning our crew decided it was time to leave. It was late, who knew when it would get over, and we had seen "all" of the game anyway. I was ready to crawl out of my skin as we left our seats. *How* could we be leaving? We weren't even losing! We

could win! We could miss one of the most exciting things in baseball, a walk-off win. But again, I had to remain silent and go with the group. So I followed them out of the stadium and walked the ten minutes to our car. We got in and buckled and ready to go and we turned on the radio so we could at least *hear* the rest of the game, and in those ten minutes...we had won the game. They were celebrating a walk-off hit the second we got in the car. We had missed it by ten minutes, all because we decided not to stay...

The second incident that came to mind didn't happen to me and is much more recent. The other night I had on game five of the Atlanta Hawks New York Knicks game. The Knicks were on the brink of elimination and with about five minutes left in the game you could kind of tell it was just over. The air had gone out of the game. The fans were deflated. It was done. Eventually, the camera panned to the tunnel which led out of the stadium where Spike Lee was leaving the game early. Spike Lee who is hands down one of the most loyal, adamant Knicks fans on earth, and he was leaving early. And I get it, they were losing. Their playoff run was done. But this was a team that hadn't even *made* the playoffs in years, let alone won a playoff game which they had done a few nights prior. Sure, they were about to get bounced, but they had had an insanely successful season and I, along with the commentators, just could not believe that their most diehard

fan was bailing on the last few minutes. You stay. You stay to give your team a standing ovation of appreciation for the season that was, for the effort they put in, to show that you still stand with them even though it's over. No matter what, you stay. In those closing minutes, you stay...

We jump back into Mark's gospel this morning and it can feel a little bit disorienting, like where are we and what is going on in Jesus' life. We've been ping-ponging around the gospels a little bit lately, and now we're settling back into a regular rhythm, so we find Jesus back at the beginning. He's been baptized, been tempted in the wilderness, called the disciples, and begun his public ministry with a smattering of healings and exorcisms around Galilee. Yet, as he returns home to Nazareth, he finds that his reputation has already started to spread. Authorities have come down from Jerusalem to question him and see what all the fuss is about. His own family has pushed their way through the crowds and tried to get him to be quiet and just come home, because they think he's gone off the rails. There are accusations flying around of possession and working in conjunction with Satan and the whole thing just has the feeling that it's about point two seconds away from some pitchforks and a burning stake.

Yet, Jesus doesn't panic. He doesn't flee. He doesn't scream and yell. He meets the accusations head on and points out how ridiculous they

sound. Why exactly would Satan be working against his own interests? Jesus has been out here exorcising demons and kicking evil out of the world, which would be diametrically opposed to Satan's goals. Jesus says that if he was working on behalf of evil, on behalf of Satan, the things he is doing would only serve to make evil crumble in on itself because a house divided cannot stand. He pretty much says, you all are out here saying, "I've lost my mind!," when you're the ones proclaiming the crazy theories.

But what to do about his family? This becomes a whole separate issue. Because even after his speech, his mother, brothers, and sisters are still outside waiting for him, wanting him to come home and stop all this nonsense. And I mean, if we look at it objectively can we really blame them? Jesus went from being just one of the family, helping Dad out in the carpenter shop, to one day wandering out to the Jordan River to hear the wild, locust eating guy talk about baptism, and then he was gone for 40 days, came back, and suddenly started healing people and calling them to follow him. Even with Mary having known what might be on the horizon for her son, it had to be jarring to have it happen like this and to hear what others were saying about him. Their protection instincts had to have kicked in a little bit, for him and for themselves. If his reputation is sullied, then the

reputation of their whole family might be in danger. So they want him to come home, they want him to stay in Nazareth.

But Jesus wants none of this. Instead, he looks around this room filled with people, most of whom have come because they believe in him and the wonders he is performing, and he says, here is my family. This room filled with strangers and believers and doubters and maybe some friendly faces, this is my family. Because from now on, family is defined by those who do the will of God. But here's the weird thing. As far as we know, no one in this crowd has really *done* anything. We know nothing of their faith, of how they're doing the will of God. What we do know about those gathered around Jesus is one small thing: they've stayed. They've stayed even with people shouting dissenting opinions and calling Jesus evil. They've stayed even though others have claimed he'd lost his mind. They stayed. They didn't bail. They kept listening, even when everything was going wild around them. They stayed and they let Jesus be Jesus. They didn't try to change him or what he was doing. They didn't question it or try to get him to do things differently so it was more palatable. They stayed, and they let Jesus be who he was. They stayed at the feet of the Messiah.

It might seem like a small thing...that doing the will of God could be as simple as doing something like staying. Something as simple as letting

Jesus be Jesus...and yet...look at the world we live in. Staying is not a thing we do. Let's face it, when the going gets tough, we all say, "peace out," we'll go find something a little less difficult. Someone says something we don't like on social media? Block, delete, unfriend. Our sports teams don't quite do what we want them to? Change the channel, change allegiances. Our church does something that frustrates, annoys, or upsets us? We go find a different one. We get confronted with our God who proclaims love, grace, and acceptance for all of God's children, no matter their skin color, their ethnicity, their sexual orientation, their gender identity, their politics? We go find a theology that somehow twists Jesus into some mouthpiece for our hatred and prejudice so we don't have to confront the ways our hearts need to change for the sake of our siblings, for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of the world around us. Let's face it, if we were the people sitting in this house, we would probably be more likely to whisper to one another, hey, umm maybe this guy is a little off-kilter, maybe we should go, rather than staying where we are, adamantly focused on the life-giving gospel of the Son of God who comes to dispel evil not encourage it, especially when that evil resides in the hearts of God's children.

We proclaim that we are the family of God and yet, we so rarely let Jesus be Jesus. We want Jesus to be who *we* want. We want Jesus to hate

the people we hate and shape the world to fit our desires and to condone whatever we aren't comfortable with changing in our own hearts, even if it's harmful. We have no interest in letting Jesus move around in the world on his own terms. We, like the scribes, like the crowds, like Jesus' own family it seems, want to define who Jesus is, and if he operates in any other way than what we want, then we brand him as a bringer of evil and despair because how dare he bring to light the ways we do those very things?

We want to be the family of God? Then, we need to be about doing the will of God, the will of God who sent Jesus into the world to us the way of love, the way that breaks our siblings free from the chains that bind them rather than tying them tighter, the will of God that says all are beloved, all are accepted, all are seen. We want to be the family of God? Then we need to actually pay attention to who God is and let Jesus be Jesus, rather than trying to shove him into some box of our own creation. We want to be the family of God? Then we need to be about staying. We need to stay when the tough gets going, when the fight gets hard, when the world seems hopeless, when it all seems impossible and we're frustrated. We need to stay because we know, we trust, we feel that staying is worth it. That's who we are. It's the end of the game. You're team is losing. What are you going to do? Are you going to bail? Or are you going to stay? **AMEN!!!**