

We're going to play a little trivia this morning to get into the two stories that I want to share. I've got a question for our baseball enthusiasts and a question for our Broadway enthusiasts. So let's go baseball first. What pitcher gave his name, rather unfortunately, to the surgery that is utilized to reconstruct a player's ulnar collateral ligament? Bingo. Tommy John. Ok, my Broadway folks, the role of Elphaba was played by whom in the original Broadway cast of *Wicked*? Yes, of course, Idina Menzel or as John Travolta calls her Adele Dazeem. Tommy John and Idina Menzel, not exactly the two people you would expect to have side by side in conversation but that's where we are this morning. So, let's start with Tommy John.

His name has become so synonymous with elbow surgery that I think sometimes people forget or don't even realize that it was named after a player. I'll be honest, it took me well into my baseball watching years to realize that this wasn't just the name of a surgery, but a person. Tommy John was the Chicago White Sox opening day starter in 1966, which is an auspicious role for a pitcher. In 1968, he clocked a 1.98 ERA and as an all-star. In the 70's with the Dodgers, he led the National League in win percentage. He was a solid, solid pitcher, and then in 1974, he tore his UCL, a ligament in his elbow, which up to that point was a career-ending injury

for a pitcher. No one had ever come back from this injury, until Tommy John. In the seasons after his surgery, he got *better*. He lost a year of play, but then went on to notch his first ever 20 win season, he helped the Dodgers make the World Series two years in a row, and continued to on a stretch of 20 win seasons well into the 80's. When he retired in 1989, he was tied for the most seasons played, 26 years. Only Nolan Ryan has broken that record. He ranks in the top 30 across baseball history in all sorts of categories, innings pitched, ERA, games started, wins, and shutouts. No one was supposed to come back from this injury and not only did he, but he came back better and honestly revolutionized baseball because now this injury isn't a career death knell, but a set back that comes with a promise of what could come after.

Ok, my Broadway folks, if you tuned out during the baseball talk, you can wake up now, it's your turn. Idina Menzel. This is not a story about the totality of her career, but about one specific night, and no not the John Travolta Oscars night. No, I want to take you back to the 2004 Tony Awards. *Wicked* is the *Hamilton* of this Broadway season. It is poised to make a clean sweep of the big awards. Both of its leading actresses are nominated for awards and this show has brought things to a Broadway stage that have never been seen before, so when the time comes for their

performance, everyone is on the edge of their seats. They're waiting for that iconic moment when Idina rises above the stage, vehemently and defiantly belting out the last notes of "Defying Gravity." The performance starts and it is electric. It is hands down one of the best Tony performances ever, but people noticed something after it was done. Idina's breathing structure seemed *off*, people were critical that seemed like she was breathing heavily. She still sounded incredible, but there was just *something* that wasn't her norm. It was only after the show, after she received her Tony, that the truth was revealed—she performed having just had an asthma attack. Any Broadway song is hard to perform, but "Defying Gravity" is next level and this woman performed it barely able to breathe.

For both of these figures, the sat in the midst of devastating realities. Is my career over? Am I going to be able to breathe on live tv? How do I get through this? What do I do next? How do I keep going? How do I throw that first pitch after surgery? How do I hit my first note? They were in the midst of tunnels for which they could never imagine the darkness, and they had no clue how they were going to get through, but they did, and that is what brings us to today, to this moment, to this rest stop on Abbi and Luke's faith journeys.

As you both take this next step in your faith, you stand on the precipice of new things, new things which can be daunting, scary, and feel like you are in that tunnel wondering what comes next. Luke, you're starting high school and all of the craziness that brings. You will have a new baseball team, the whole mess of JV and Varsity to figure out. Abbi, college is on its way. You will have a new city, a new place to live, and a whole new life surrounded by Broadway everywhere you turn. And in the midst of both of these journeys there are going to be moments where you are like, what in the world am I doing? Where am I going? How do I even get through this?

Now, the easy thing to tell you is that there is a light at the end of that tunnel. We all go through the hard and we all eventually come out the other side. I could be super cliché and be like, our second lesson tells you that endurance and character and hardship all produce hope and hope is the thing that will never disappoint, so as long as you cling to hope, it's going to be alright, but that is a decidedly way too rosy and simple view of the world, and isn't the faith life that you are committing to today.

It is beyond true that hope is going to be one of your greatest strengths going forward in your faith journey. It will be the thing that helps you and shows you the light at the end of the tunnel. But hope and that light don't

make the tunnel go away, it doesn't magically transport you through it so you're out on the other side without going through the hard. The hard is going to happen. You might bobble a grounder at a key point in a game, you might completely miss a note during an audition, there's no avoiding those things happening in life and committing to a life of faith is not committing to a life of leisure and easy paths. None of the things God has promised you from the moment you were born, through your baptisms, through your first communions, through today have included that you are going to get off scot free from the tough stuff, but what God has and does promise you today and on into every single day of the future is that you don't go through the tunnel alone and the tunnel is not the end of the story. Hope is the end of the story.

I wish nothing more than to tell you that your faith is going to make the road smooth and simple, but that's just not the deal. What I can tell you though is that when those tunnels come, and yes that is tunnels plural because the hard comes around multiple times unfortunately, is that this faith you have grown and cultivated is going to be a balm in your heart and hopefully give you a peace which passes understanding to sustain and thrive even in the midst of the tunnel. It won't necessarily make it shorter or easier, but it will make the light at the end brighter, more visible, and hopefully will make the tunnel a smidge more tolerable. Because there is

nothing, nothing in this world that you are going to go through alone, and that doesn't just apply to these two, but to all of us and it is a reminder that we sometimes need shouted from the rooftops.

We live in a world that *thrives* off of going it alone, being the lone wolf, and kind of feeling like it's a badge of honor to have gotten through something *all on our own*, but that was never the life God created us for and it is certainly not the life that Jesus promised us. A life of faith comes with a two-fold promise of accompaniment. First and foremost, obviously, is that there is nothing that we go through without God there and not in some clichéd, these were the moments I carried you, type of way, but in a stalwart, abiding, never-ending, I am walking beside you through the darkest tunnel and promising you that I am the light that is not only at the end, but here in the midst of the dark. But the other promise is sitting right around you now. To Abbi and Luke, specifically, this congregation is a massive extension of your family and there is not a moment of your life where you are not going to have the biggest cheering section right behind you, treating every moment like its your curtain call or you just smoked a ball over the center field wall. We are here to love and support you for every minute, because today isn't just about the promises you make, but about the promises we all make to

you, and that promise is that we will never leave you stranded or alone in tunnel, along the journey of faith.

And that is the reminder we all need today too. Over last few weeks, I have been starkly reminded of how vital, how life-giving, how heart-healing the gift of a faith community can be, and we forget that. We get busy, we get stuck in our own heads, we start thinking that no one understands us or what we're going through and suddenly we're back to lone wolfing it. But every moment, of every day, we have the same cheering section that we're promising these two today. The hope that we have, the hope that we proclaim is not that the hard will never come, but that we will never do it alone and we will always have someone who will encourage us to keep going. But we can't forget that those people are there. Sitting around you today are people who love you, who have always loved you, and will continue to love you. People who see you and know you and say, yeah, sibling of God, I've got your back, let me help you carry the burden. Our community of faith are the doctors that knit the torn ligaments of our faith back together, we are the inhalers that burst release into our lungs, we are the light that shines in the darkness and says I have been there too, and there is no tunnel we can't get through. We will do this together, and that above all is a hope which does not disappoint. **AMEN!!!**