

## **Fulfilling the Promise**

This summer, a 70-year-old Texan named Darwin Day was downsizing his house when deep in the back corner of a dusty closet he found a childhood collection of baseball cards from the 1950s. Among the old cards was one that invited fans to enter a contest sponsored by Bazooka, the pink bubble gum that included the cards in every pack. The contest offered the promise of winning these “swell prizes”: A Gilbert chemistry lab, a Stellar 600 power microscope or a Spalding fielder’s glove. To win one of these swell prizes, all you had to do was predict the scores of two games to be played on July 19, 1957, and send in your prediction with five Bazooka Bubble gum wrappers “or reasonable facsimiles,” by July 11<sup>th</sup>. What the contest holders forgot was to mention the year your predictions needed to be mailed in.

Turns out our man Darwin Day had a bit of a goofy sense of humor and he thought it would be a laugh to enter the 1957 contest in 2016. He got on the web and found the scores of the 1957 games. He found the address for Bazooka Bubble gum headquarters and the name of current President of Bazooka Bubble Gum Inc., Tony Jacobs. Now it turns out Tony Jacobs had once worked for another candy company, Life Savers, and our friend Darwin Day had grown up near a Life Savers factory as a boy, collecting Bazooka baseball cards. Young Darwin could tell the day of the week by the smells coming from the plant. Mondays smelled like cherry; Tuesdays, lemon; Wednesdays, grape and so on.

In his old baseball card collection, Darwin Day also noticed that he had a card of a player with the exact same name as the Big Bubble Gum executive, Tony Jacobs. So Darwin addressed the envelope to Tony Jacobs at Bazooka Bubble Gum Inc., stuffed it with the Tony Jacobs baseball card and the filled out contest card

with his postdated predictions of the July 19, 1957 baseball games and a cover letter. There is a nice bit in the story about how he got the Bazooka Bubble Gum wrappers, but we will skip that for the sake of time. Suffice it to say, when he had the wrappers, he popped them in the envelope with everything else, sealed the envelope, and sent the whole kit and caboodle to Bazooka.

A few days after that, Tony Jacobs, of Bazooka Bubble Gum, received a mysterious letter. Three individual items that didn't seem to have an immediate connection: A letter which described an old man's memories of growing up near a Life Savers factory, a baseball card with a 1950s player who shared his name, and what looked like an old, completed Bazooka promotional contest card.

It took a while for Jacobs to cotton on to what it was all about, but when he did, he was delighted. Since it would have been quite an effort to locate a Gilbert chemistry lab, a Stellar 600 power microscope or a Spalding fielder's glove, Jacobs sent Darwin a Bazooka pillow and a Bazooka T-shirt, boxes of gum and a black Louisville Slugger glove with tan stitching. He also sent Darwin back the contest card and the letter, but he kept the Tony Jacobs baseball card, which now hangs framed in his office.

Long ago in corporate America, a candy company made a promise to their Bubble Gum buying public. They filled the hearts of little boys, and a few little girls, full of hope that their future could be full of "swell prizes." Six decades later the promise was fulfilled and hope was realized. But not all stories of promise are as sweetly fulfilled. Not all prizes are simply swell. Not all hopes are realized without tremendous effort or intention.

Once upon a time in 1776, a bunch of folks thought it was high time for Great Britain to stop their tyranny over the people of the United States. They

wrote up all their complaints on a sheet of paper in a logical argument so all onlooking nations could understand why the United States were making such a radical move. But before they headed into the great laundry list of all their grievances, they began with a simple statement about what they believed, just to set their concerns in a clear context. These men, many of whom were Unitarian or Unitarian-leaning by the way, wanted to make their assumptions about human nature clear; they said: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” These are the truths we hold self-evident, they said, and the king is not only disregarding these truths he is consciously acting, often violently, against them.

We, the people of the United States, want to play by those rules, we want to act as if those self-evident, inalienable rights of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness *matter*. We want to keep our promises to each other about Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That is the promise of this new nation.

Now it took the authors of the Constitution and the Constitution’s amendments to be a little more specific about everyone’s rights, but eventually the covenant, the living breathing aspirations of this country, the Covenant made new every day, began to take shape.

So far so good. We filled out the contest card and sent it in with the bubble gum wrappers. We even sent in a letter explaining the sweetness of rainbow-colored life savers. But every day we go to the mailbox and there are no swell prizes. Every day we go to the mailbox, the television, the radio and we hear that once again the promise of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit Happiness has not only been blatantly disregarded, our society has consciously acted - often violently -

against that promise. You know what I am talking about. Besides Wells Fargo and Yahoo and the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Besides an education system that guarantees only some people will get ahead. Besides all the children living, hungry, in poverty. Besides a military industrial complex that keeps us in never-ending battles. You know what I am talking about. I am talking about:

Dontre Hamilton (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

Eric Garner (New York)

Trayvon Martin (Sanford, Florida)

John Crawford III (Dayton, Ohio)

Michael Brown Jr. (Ferguson, Missouri)

Ezell Ford (Florence, California)

Dante Parker (Victorville, California)

Tanisha Anderson (Cleveland, Ohio)

Akai Gurley (Brooklyn, New York)

Tamir Rice (Cleveland, Ohio)

Rumain Brisbon (Phoenix, Arizona)

Jerame Reid (Bridgeton, New Jersey)

Tony Robinson (Madison, Wisconsin)

Phillip White (Vineland, New Jersey)

Eric Harris (Tulsa, Oklahoma)

Walter Scott (North Charleston, South Carolina)

Freddie Gray (Baltimore, Maryland)

Mario Woods (San Francisco, California)

Alton Sterling (Baton Rouge, Louisiana)

India Cummings (Buffalo, NY)

Philandro Castille (St. Anthony, Minnesota)

Paul O'Neal (Chicago, Illinois)

Korryn Gaines (Randallstown, Maryland)

And most recently, Terrence Crutcher of Tulsa, Oklahoma and Keith Lamont Scott of Charlotte, North Carolina.

All black men women and children from every nook and cranny of the nation with the Self-evident, Unalienable rights of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Men, women and children with whom we have made a promise. And, my sweet heavens, it seems we have failed them and their families. And we have failed ourselves.

We have broken the covenant, but a covenant is not a contract. It is not made and signed and sealed once and for all, sent to the attorneys for safekeeping or guarded under glass in a museum. A covenant is not a static artifact and it is not a sworn oath: Whereas, whereas, whereas . . . Therefore, I will do this, or I'll die, so help me God. A covenant is a living, breathing aspiration, made new every day. It can't be enforced simply by consequences, though it may be renewed by forgiveness and by grace, when we stumble, when we forget, when we fail.

A lot of us don't come to church to feel uncomfortable, we get enough of that elsewhere. We got enough of that in our past. Here we want to feel comfortable and joyful. So does that mean we simply ignore the mail box that is filled with broken promises instead of swell prizes? Do we ignore the videos of the shootings? Do we pretend the riots have nothing to do with us? Can we call ourselves moral people of faith and sit on the sidelines?

Let me remind you of the difference between optimism and hope. Optimists are filled with joy simply because they ignore the evidence all around them. The hopeful are those who are fully aware of the current circumstances and believe that a better future is possible anyway. As people of faith, we must be people of hope who know that the arc of history is long, but with our great effort and intention it will bend toward justice. We can, we must, remain hopeful, joyful moral people of faith if we are to call ourselves back into covenant, through forgiveness and grace, and learn how to be better promise keepers. So we may finally build the beloved community of which we dream.

In the story of Noah's Ark, the rainbow represented God's promise never to wipe humanity off the face of the earth again. Somehow rainbows became associated with flying unicorns and pots of gold. But more important, they became associated with the spectrum Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer diversity. The Rainbow became a symbol of pride, and it is a symbol of promise. The promise of a world in which all people would enjoy their self-evident, inalienable rights of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Since the Stonewall riots of 1969, we have seen a realization of that promise, not to its fulfillment, but we've come a long way baby and the pride is still going strong.

As hopeful, joyful, moral people of faith our questions always have to be "Who has been left out of the covenant?" "Who else is having their self-evident, inalienable rights of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness denied?" "Who else in the rainbow of humanity have we failed?" "Who else needs to be at the welcome table?" As hopeful, joyful, moral people of faith, we need to live in the uncomfortable Noah's rainbow arc of history. The voyage is long, my friends. But

we, with great effort and intention and a lot of help, can bend our voyage toward justice.

Right now, we have an opportunity to live our covenant with all our body, and all our minds, and all our souls. Today, there is moral awakening of justice-loving people united in a coalition powerful enough to stop the murders of unarmed black lives, and press on beyond that very basic demand of justice to reclaim the promise of democracy. Today, we can begin grappling with racial and economic inequality. Today, we can join an up-swelling movement that unites black, white and brown, rich, poor, employed and employed, LGBTQ and straight, documented and undocumented, religious and secular and people of all abilities, in the uncomfortable ark that will eventually carry us to a rainbow that we all can call our own. Together this coalition can fulfill the promise.

Today, at this church we have a number of opportunities to get into that coalition:

- Join the Racial Justice Ministry Team
- Register for the Diversity workshop offered by our regional leaders. It will be held here on October 29
- Come to the November Third Friday Potluck co-sponsored by the Religious Education and the Racial Justice Ministry Team. They will be showing *Zootopia* together.
- Join me in supporting VOICE Buffalo, a racially integrated community organizing collective that works for social change and holds decision-makers accountable.

All of these opportunities are listed on a handout in the Parish Hall welcome table.

My best beloveds, you were probably looking at the news this week and wondering “What can I do? How hopeless.” “What can I do while all around me the promise is broken?”

I’ll tell you what. This is what you can do. You can stand on the side of Love. Not wishy washy love, not romantic love, certainly not erotic love (though all that is good stuff too). This is what you can do. You can fulfill the promise. Starting today, you can stand on the side of Transformative Love that overcomes all fear, all hatred, and all oppression.

For Further Study:

Mele, Christopher, "A Baseball Contest Pays off, 6 Decades After the Fact" *New York Times*, September 21, 2016

Safford, Victoria, "Bound in Covenant" *UU World*, Summer 2013