



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
September 16, 2018 Sermon

Conversations With God: He's Like Us; He Gets Us; There's Hope!

Scripture Lessons: Luke 6:6-11; Hebrew 2:10-13, 16-18

Jim Abbott has accomplished what very few people have: an All-American in college at The University of Michigan, an Olympic gold medalist, a major-league baseball player, and one of only 256 major-leaguers to pitch a no-hitter. And yet that's not how he's remembered; he's remembered today—and was known throughout his athletic career—as the kid—later, the guy—with only one hand.

He was born that way. In his autobiography *Imperfect*, Abbott says this:

[T]he greater problem [was] my right arm, which was small and weak and wouldn't do much. Worse, of course, it ended at about the wrist. As I grew older, the structural condition of that arm and hand became less important—as far as my parents were concerned—than the condition of my self-esteem, particularly as I came to realize all the other boys and girls had two fully developed hands. Then we'd deal with what I was going to do about it. There would be daily physical dilemmas, daily obstacles and daily triumphs and failures, which never did disappear. But there was always tomorrow.

Abbott then recalls the dedication, love, and sacrifice of his parents, who were both teenagers—and unmarried—when he was born:

Mom and Dad were consumed by preparing me for the world outside our living room. That meant frequent trips to doctors and specialists and physical therapists, frequent examinations and X-rays, followed by the process of sorting through the results, opinions, and recommendations. As I neared kindergarten, they wondered if I'd be allowed into the public elementary school in the neighborhood and, if I was, if I could cope with it. [footnote: remember the Americans with Disabilities Act wasn't passed until 1990 when Jim Abbott was already a major-league pitcher. It was, to say the least, long overdue.]

Abbott continues his story:

With that [kindergarten] approaching, we spent a little more time on the structural side of my handicap, which meant more time at the Mott Children's Hospital and consultations with the Crippled Children's Fund, which, in spite of its ghastly name, did ease the financial burden on the family. In each doctor's office, the initial consultation began the same way: a long look at my right arm and a question, posed inoffensively: "What happened here?" Of course my parents had no answer.

Imagine you're Jim Abbott, five years old, sitting in the all those doctor's' offices, hearing all those doctors ask that same question time and time again—about you: "What happened here?"

And then there were the trips to the hospital. Abbott writes this:

Before long, I was in the backseat of the family car, headed west on Interstate 69, bound for Grand Rapids and Mary Free Bed Hospital, Mom and Dad not too sure about it but earnestly honoring the opinions of the experts. I was five. I'd spend a month there, most of it by myself.

Unable to stay in Grand Rapids because of work, school, my baby brother, and the fact that they could not have afforded the hotel room, Mom and Dad visited on weekends. I think it was harder on Mom than me.

And as for his time in the hospital, Abbott writes this:

While the staff did wonderful work and was quite kind, for a five-year-old on his own the hospital was cold and sterile and not at all like my room and bed back in Flint. These beds had nets over them. I couldn't decide whether they were there to keep me in or other people out. I spent a lot of time on that conundrum.

But in the hospital, as a five-year-old, Abbott saw some things that would stay with him his whole life. He writes: *I'd not considered myself before to be at any great disadvantage, since I managed to get most things done with some effort. Here, I saw children near my age with no legs, or no arms and no legs, or various combinations thereof. . . . I was lonely and shy, but made a friend in a little girl with a big, friendly smile. She had remarkable spirit. At the hospital to master the daily tasks that everyone outside the hospital thought nothing of, that little girl had learned to open a tube of toothpaste, squeeze the toothpaste onto a toothbrush, and brush her teeth on her own. This was considered a great victory, and she happily shared it with visitors. She had no arms, but she had two legs and two feet, and she used those.*

And so, as a young child, Abbott came to some grown-up conclusions:

Even at five, going on six, I admired the kids in the hospital for their determination and encouraging outlook. They were nice to me. Their challenges were beyond anything I could have imagined.

Fast forward now: September 4th, 1993; Yankee Stadium. If you compare baseball stadiums to cathedrals (as those who wax poetic about baseball are wont to do), then Yankee Stadium is Winchester, Norte Dame, the National, St. Peter's Basilica, and the Hagia Sophia all rolled into one. And the pitcher's mound is the center of the cathedral. So on September 4th, 1993, Jim Abbott stood on the pitcher's mound in Yankee Stadium in New York, his arms lifted exultingly over his head, shouting "yeah, baby" over and over and over again. He had just gotten the last out of the game—a ground ball to the shortstop.

What happened here? The kid with only one hand had just thrown a no-hitter—then only the 234th no-hitter in all of major-league history.

In his autobiography, Abbott freezes the frame at this moment, and takes us on a tour of all his friends and teammates, teachers, coaches and managers, who had supported him and believed in him, helped him quiet all the doubters and their doubts ("How's he going to catch the ball, field his position, throw to first base, much less bat?"). He takes us all over the country: where they were, what they were doing, and what they thought the moment when they heard about his no-hitter. Then he takes us to his wife Dana, sitting in the stands behind home plate. Then he takes us to his parents and his younger brother, listening to the game on the car radio in the driveway in Flint, Michigan. And then, finally, he takes us here:

And in homes from Anaheim to Baltimore, in places where children wished only to be normal, to fit in, maybe the world took another step toward them, not away.

And so they came—those children who wished only to be normal, to fit in, who wanted the world only to step toward them and not away—they came, those children, and their parents, and their families. They had been coming already, all along, throughout his major-league career, but now they *really* came—to the ballparks when the Yankees came to town. They purchased their tickets months in advance, circled the date on the calendar, counted the days, and then finally got in the car and drove—sometimes for hours on end—to the ballpark, to get there hours before the game, to come down near the field, in hopes of seeing him, of getting a few words of encouragement from him, of getting his autograph: "Jim, Mr. Abbott, Jim—over here, yes, would you, could you,

please, sign this?" And Jim Abbott always did come over, signing autographs with all the dexterity with which he fielded his position, talking to, encouraging, the children, their parents, and their families for hours on end before the game. It's a bond of identification, that's not hard to see, not hard to feel: He's like me; he gets me; *and he's a big-league ballplayer*—there's hope!

It was the the same with all the children's hospitals and the children's charities, all the kids' organizations, in all the cities all over the country, when the Yankees came to town: "Mr. Abbott, Jim, would you, could you, come by, just to visit, just to say a few words—it would mean so much." And he always did come by, with all the grace and compassion with which he lived his life. And it was the same bond of identification: He's like us; he gets us; *and he's a big-league ballplayer*—there's hope!

And you know, it's not just kids with disabilities, or even just kids. Oh no, we middle-aged men feel it, too. Right now, there's a major-leaguer—this year, he's pitching for the Texas Rangers—named Bartolo Colon. Bartolo Colon is *at least* 45 years old. I say "at least" because that's his *listed* age—ballplayers are notorious for fudging their ages downward (management being notorious for favoring youth). And as with many men, as he's gotten a little older, Bartolo's physique has . . . well, changed [hand-motion] a little: Bartolo is listed at 5'11" 285 pounds—*listed*, mind you. Bartolo even has a nickname: Big Sexy.

I tell you, my fellow middle-aged men: He's like us, he gets us; *and he's a big-league ballplayer*—there's hope. "Bartolo, Mr. Colon, Bartolo, over here, yes, would you, could you, please, sign this?" That would be us, too, if we didn't feel so foolish about it—you know it's true.

Back in the 1990's, after Jim Abbott threw his no-hitter, the whispers grew louder. They had been there all along, throughout his major-league career—but now they grew louder: "Abbott spends too much time on the kids, on all that charity stuff; it's hurting him on the field, he's neglecting his career, he would be a much better pitcher if he would focus on his pitching stuff."

These whispers were given voice by none other than "The Boss," George Steinbrenner, owner and president of the Yankees. Before the 1994 season, this happened:

*Before spring training even started, "The Boss" blamed Abbott's mediocre 1993 performance on his charity work and frequent visits with disabled children. "Jim Abbott's got to give 100 percent of his attention to **baseball!**" Steinbrenner demanded.*

Now, I ask you: is it any wonder? Is it any wonder that baseball fans of sound mind and decent sensibilities all across this great country of ours—is it any wonder that we dislike the New York Yankees so much? Is it any wonder? Our Lord said love your enemies; he did not say love the New York Yankees!

All of which goes to show that Steinbrenner, like all of us, had a little of the Pharisee in him. When Jesus healed the man with the withered right hand, did the Pharisee's rejoice, and give glory to God? Not at all: "Jesus has got to give 100 percent of his attention to the Sabbath," they demanded. Never mind that, by healing the man, Jesus was honoring the true spirit and purpose of the Sabbath—he's got to focus on what we Pharisees think is important, what serves us.

Never mind that Jim Abbott was honoring the true spirit and purpose of baseball—he's got to focus on what George Steinbrenner thinks is important, what serves him.

Now I know that when we hear this account of Jesus' healing the man, our focus is not so much on the Pharisees and the Sabbath but on other questions: did this miracle—and others like it—really happen? And if Jesus really

did heal the man, why doesn't he do the same thing now, for all the children in all the children's hospitals everywhere? These are good questions, and with some time and study and prayer and thought, along with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I think we can arrive at good, working, and workable answers.

First, as for the possibility of miracles, well, much of it depends on how you define your terms: "*A miracle is a violation of a natural law by divine agency.*" OK—but just what is a natural law, anyway? Is it a fixed, ultimate, inviolable determinant of our universe or is it merely an observed regularity in the way our world has worked, which could easily be superseded by the power that created our universe and its laws? And just what do we mean by "divine agency"—is it direct or indirect? That is, does the miracle have to come with trumpet—"Everyone, attention: this is God, it's God doing this!" Or can it come, less directly and noisily, through human actions and efforts, as well as through the coming together of events?

And please note: these are questions that none of our sciences can answer; they certainly relate to the discoveries—and perhaps the underlying assumptions—of our sciences, but no one science can provide definitive experimental answers to them.

And as for miracles happening today. . . well, they might well be happening and we might well be seeing them, if only we had eyes to see. You could even see Jim Abbott standing on the mound of Yankee Stadium—yeah, baby—as a kind of miracle: God acting indirectly through human actions and efforts, as well as through the coming together of events, to bring about something unexpected, if not unprecedented—something true and good and beautiful.

What happened here? A miracle. A miracle of the human spirit, of persistence, courage, love, grace, and goodness. The same was true in the doctor's office when Jim Abbott was five years old. And it was true in the children's hospital in Grand Rapids, when that little girl with the big smile and remarkable spirit learned to brush her teeth. These were miracles, too—everyday miracles. Yeah, baby.

But all of this, as important as it is, may be missing the main point, the biggest miracle of all, the miracle of all miracles. which is this: He's like us; he gets us—there's hope. I'm talking about God here.

In many of the miracles Jesus performs, especially the healing miracles, we get this: "Jesus, moved with pity," or "Jesus, moved by compassion" . . . "reached out, touched, healed . . ." It's the same Greek word for "pity" and "compassion," and it means to feel identification with something or someone in your heart, to feel that identification in the seat of your affections, your inmost parts, lungs, liver, kidneys, literally, to feel it in your gut.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews puts it this way:

Jesus became like us, in every way—He's like us.

Because he himself was tested by what he suffered—He gets us.

He is able to help us as *we* are being tested—There's hope.

Yes, we are being tested as the young Jim Abbott was tested: with daily physical dilemmas, daily obstacles and daily triumphs and failures, which never disappear. And yet there is always tomorrow—there is always hope.

If we have but eyes to see, we will see the miracles of the human spirit all around us, miracles of persistence, courage, love, grace, and goodness: God acting through human actions and efforts, as well as through the coming together of events, to bring about something unexpected, if not unprecedented—something true and good and beautiful.

He's like us; he gets us; there's hope.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.