

“The Hardest Thing”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – November 21, 2021

John 18:33-37

The sports writers at USA Today put their heads together to list what, in their opinion, were the 10 hardest things to do in sports.

10. Skiing the alpine downhill race at 80 mph.
9. Saving a penalty kick in soccer.
8. Bicycling the Tour de France covering 2,114 miles.
7. Running a marathon.
6. Landing a quadruple toe loop on figure skates — with grace.
5. Returning a 130-140 mph tennis serve.
4. Hitting a golf ball straight and long.
3. Pole vaulting.
2. Driving a race car while enduring 5 Gs in the corners in 120-degree heat, knowing a mistake can kill you.

And Number 1 is hitting a major-league baseball pitch thrown at 90 plus mph by judging it in 1/1,000th of a second. If you can pull it off successfully three out of ten times, you'll land a multi-million-dollar contract.

Sports feats are difficult. No doubt. They take endurance, skill, training, and talent, but ultimately, they aren't important. At the end of the day, they don't matter. After all, athletic competitions, even the world championships, are just games. Life itself is considerably harder and much more challenging.

So, what's the hardest thing to do in life? Here's a list of life's ten most challenging events that require daring, hope, talent, and skill. Keep in mind that what is Number 10 for you may be Number 1 for your neighbors.

10. Raising children.
9. Giving forgiveness.
8. Apologizing.
7. Loving your enemy.
6. Quitting cigarettes, getting sober, abandoning an addiction.
5. Regaining the lost trust of loved ones.
4. Keeping faith in God amidst trials and tribulations.
3. Living homeless.
2. Burying a child.
1. Removing hospital life support for a loved one.

This list makes the complicated judgments involved in skiing at 80 mph, pole vaulting and hitting a baseball look easy.

The life list is a tough list, but that last one — making decisions about life or death — is one of the toughest. Even when all the medical facts are known and understood, after the prognosis is clear, even when the choice is obvious, it is a tremendously agonizing decision to remove a respirator from a loved one. You've become the judge. You're going to decide between life and death. Top world athletes, even on their hardest days, never make that kind of choice.

Thumbs up, or thumbs down.

Is this kind of stuff in your job description? Is it what you expect in life? Probably not.

It was in Pontius Pilate's job description. As Governor of the Province of Judea for Rome, he was always making serious choices, yet at the same time, he is for us, a sort of everyman. He was troubled in difficult situations just as we are when he tried to resist certain pressures, listen to his spouse, have courage, recognize

goodness, then make a choice. He did well for nearly 11 years. The Samaritan Uprising in the year 36 was his undoing. He made a wrong choice.

The result? He was exiled to Gaul in shame and disgrace, committing suicide there in 38.

Pilate was good at keeping the peace. But keeping the peace isn't always the same as doing what's right. Sometimes keeping the peace is just the opposite of doing what's right. Sometimes we choose not to apologize. Sometimes we choose not to forgive.

Sometimes peace, as the world defines it, is the wrong choice. Sometimes it's better to take the risk. Sometimes we need to ski fast, cycle far or take a flying leap to do what is right; to do what we should.

Did Pilate lose sight of what was important? Do we?

It was just another workday for Pilate when Jesus showed up. One can imagine Pilate dropping whatever he was doing, then going to see this criminal brought to his court. It's just another day of the week to keep the peace and to keep his post. Just another life to judge. Ask questions, listen, weigh the evidence, then decide. Live or die.

The governor may have smirked at the irony of the circumstances — a captured; bound man accused of claiming kingship. A powerless peasant, really? An unarmed Jew from the underclass? Pilate asks, "Are you a king?"

On the face of it, it's a preposterous question. Obviously, to Pilate, Jesus was not a king. He had no army. He had no city. He had no funding. No robes. No weapons. He had nothing. He was nothing. This amusing man is harmless.

It's in the hard places in our lives that we must ask the tough questions while seeking godly truth. Then we should listen to the answers, weigh the evidence, judge, and act — just like Pilate.

In the end, Pilate gave Jesus over to the whims of the furious rabble. He did the politically expedient thing. He kept the peace. Maybe he prevented a riot. He believed he had done the right thing.

That's where Pilate and the rest of us are similar. When we are presented with life's difficult choices, we may choose to be expedient rather than do what is ultimately right. Making the right choice isn't always easy or popular.

But is it Christian?

So, what's the hardest thing for you? Is it learning to forgive when we are hurt? Apologizing when we would rather not? Raising our children with love, kindness and direction every day, tirelessly? Loving our enemies, both personal and national? Having courage and faith in the face of our child's death? These acts take hope and courage and are more challenging than anything in sports.

But we're going to face them. No doubt about it. That's what life is all about.

Yet, God expects us to step into the batter's box. And swing. Amen.