

Perseverance
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, April 7, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

'I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.' In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Brad Gaines was born to play football. His father was a star defensive end for Murray State. His uncle played in the Super Bowl for the Pittsburgh Steelers. His oldest brother Greg was a standout linebacker for Tennessee and then for the Seattle Seahawks. Another brother Chris was an All-American and then played for the Miami Dolphins. So Brad made it his goal to outdo them all, and broke their records on both offense and defense in high school.

He was recruited by Alabama, Texas, and Georgia. But, to everyone's surprise, he chose Vanderbilt. It was in his hometown of Nashville, he would have a chance to play with his brother Chris, he liked the new head coach, and he knew that a degree from an academically prestigious university like Vanderbilt would open doors for him, no matter what direction his life took. By his junior year, he was the leading receiver in the SEC.

But one Saturday afternoon in Oxford, Mississippi, Brad's life changed forever – not from a pass he caught but from one he didn't. At the 3, the defender hit him from behind to break up what would have been a touchdown. The defender's name was Chucky Mullins. Brad looked back and saw that Chucky was still down. It would turn out that he had the most feared injury in athletics – a broken neck. He would be paralyzed for life.

For some, or perhaps for many of us, there can be one date in which an event so jarring happens that a person views her or his life in terms of before and after that particular date. For Brad Gaines, it was that fateful date in Oxford – October 28th, 1989.

For a devout Pharisee named Saul, it was a day on the road to Damascus when a blinding light brought him to his knees. Up until that point, he had considered himself blameless in following the letter of the law of God. He had been circumcised on the right day. He belonged to one of the most favored tribes. He was recognized for his zeal as a persecutor of an upstart insurrection and was on his way to do more. But on that fateful day on the road, his life changed forever. In fact, he was given a new name. Saul became Paul. And, more importantly, he was given a new identity. He was now a beloved child of Christ.

One of Paul's many gifts as a missionary was to learn the cultures of the peoples he was persuading to the cause of Christ. In the case of the Greeks and Romans, much of their culture was centered around sports. Not that any of us would schedule a wedding or baptism around a big SEC or Memphis Tigers ball game. In his book *Paul's Metaphors*, David Wilson writes that he believes Paul is not talking about a foot race in today's Epistle lesson from Philippians. Instead, he presents evidence that Paul is describing a chariot race. That gives the metaphor of pressing

on toward the goal a different meaning. The goal is not just winning, it is surviving. Chariot races were the most dangerous sport of that day, much as depicted in the classic movie Ben-Hur starring Charlton Heston in 1959, or the not-so-classic remake of 2016.

Williams writes that turning was the most treacherous part of chariot racing: "If the chariot hugged the turning post too closely, it ran the risk of crashing into it; if it swung too widely, it either lost position or was in danger of being overrun and wrecked by the other competitors. Therefore a charioteer had to be intent on the race with his eyes fixed on the front, not daring to look behind, lest the slightest pressure of the reins, which were wrapped around his body, produce a false move causing him to lose the race, and possibly his life."

Paul encourages the Philippians and us to follow the example of the chariot racer. Maybe he was really writing to himself. Because when he wrote this letter, he was nowhere near a grand coliseum to see a featured chariot race. Instead, he was rotting away in a jail cell, not knowing if or when he might be executed.

Like Paul and the Philippians, we must be able to put the past in perspective and become a forward-looking people. Our very lives depend on it.

In the case of Brad Gaines, it took him a long time to move past that event on the field in Oxford one October afternoon. He's probably still not past it. But over time he discovered a faith that helped him move forward.

At first, Brad experienced what any of would experience. He said: "I just couldn't get what happened to Chucky out of my mind. It was with me every waking minute of the day, and at night I'd lie there in the dark running it back and forth through my mind. Over and over. Hundreds of times. I'd go to bed thinking about Chucky, and I'd wake up thinking about Chucky." Brad built an emotional barrier around himself and couldn't even talk to his family about what he felt.

Like any good athlete, he wanted to do something – he told his coach he wanted to do something for Chucky. His coach advised him that most psychologists and counselors considered it not a good idea for Brad to see Chucky at that point. But Brad rejected that advice. He drove down here to Memphis, went into Chucky's hospital room, and told him who he was. Brad had to lean over to hear what he said, he practically had to put his ear against his lips, his whisper was so faint. And, in that moment, Chucky gave Brad the greatest gift of all. He whispered, "Don't worry. It wasn't your fault."

Over the next two years, Brad and Chucky forged an unusual and close friendship. It didn't matter that one grew up white middle class in the Nashville suburbs and the other grew up as a dirt poor African-American kid whose father left him to fend for himself and his family in little Russellville, Alabama. It didn't matter that they were on different teams. All that mattered was that they were now connected for life by a shared moment, a shared pain, a shared faith, and a shared hope.

When Chucky died two years later, Brad was by his side, holding his hand. When Chucky's teammates got on the bus for the funeral, Brad was among them. There was a little murmuring among the players, but Coach Billy Brewer shut that down. He announced, "Today Brad Gaines is an Ole Miss Rebel."

Brad chose not to play football his senior year. Instead, he graduated and built a health care business. He is now looking forward to a dream: Opening a medical center for athletes with head and neck trauma. And he has found another quieter way to put his grief in action. He drives 3 times a year to Russellville, Alabama, to clean and polish Chucky's gravestone on Christmas Day, on the date of the accident, and on the day Chucky died.

One day, he got a call from a pastor in Louisiana who told him about a high school player who had bottled himself up from everyone after a similar incident on the football field. The pastor asked Brad to call him. Brad said, "Why don't I just drive down there." For the first time, the player revealed his feelings to perhaps the only person on the planet who could understand what he was going through.

God led Brad to find new ways to press on toward the goal. Because true faith is not just our perseverance to follow. It is God shaping us in new and unexpected ways, persevering to give us the greatest gift, planting a forward-looking faith in each of our hearts. *Amen.*