

A couple of years ago some sports writers at USA Today came up with a list of 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 2,000 plus miles in the Tour de France. #7. Running a marathon. #6. Landing a quadruple toe loop on figure skates — with grace. #5. Returning a 140 mph tennis serve. #4. Hitting a golf ball straight and long. #3. Pole vaulting. #2. Driving a race car while enduring 5 G's in the corners, knowing a mistake can kill you. And number #1 is hitting a major-league baseball pitch thrown at 90 plus miles per hour by judging it in 1/1,000th of a second. If you can pull that off successfully three out of 10 times you might be able to land a multimillion dollar contract.

Sports feats are difficult. No doubt about it. They take endurance, skill, training and talent, but ultimately they aren't really all that important. At the end of the day we can probably agree on other matters that are more significant and essential to our lives. After all, athletic competitions, even world championships, are just games. Life itself is considerably harder and much more challenging. Which begs the question, what might be some of the most difficult hurdles we find ourselves having to overcome during our time on this earth?

So...what are some of the hardest things we may find ourselves faced with? Let me offer up a list of 10 most challenging events in this life that require daring, hope, talent and skill. Keep in mind that the ranking of this list might be different from one person to another. After all, we all have our own personal troubles or trials that would make our list look different from others, but here is a list of some major life challenges:

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

friend or relative. This list makes the complicated tasks involved in driving a race car, pole vaulting, and hitting a baseball look easy.

This 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 make. I'm certain that none of us would ever want to be in a position of having to decide between life and death for someone we care about. Top world athletes, even on their hardest days, never make that kind of choice. Which may cause us to wonder, if making that kind of decision has ever been the job description of someone we know? Most likely it hasn't.

Of course, we are all more than well aware that 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, when he put forth the effort to listen to his spouse, as he struggled to have courage, to recognize goodness, and then make a decision. Apparently He did well for nearly 11 years until eventually the **Samaritan Uprising** in the year 36CE was his undoing. He made a wrong choice. The result? He was exiled to Gaul in shame and disgrace, where he committed suicide in 38CE.

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 we discover that peace can cost us — at home, at work or even at play. Sometimes peace, as the world defines it, is the wrong choice. Sometimes it's better to take a risk. Sometimes we need to ski fast, cycle far, or take a flying leap down a hillside to do what is right; to do what we should.

Which begs the question, 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, and then going to see this criminal who was brought before 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. Which leads Pilate to ask, “Are you a king?” It's a question he may not have been asking seriously. He probably did not take the matter of Christ's kingship as soberly as we do on Christ the King Sunday. More than likely it was a rather preposterous question in the eyes of a Roman official. Obviously, to Pilate, Jesus was not a king. He had no army. He had no city. He had no funding. No robes. No weapons. No crown. He had nothing. He was nothing.

Jesus responds to Pilate's question with an unexpected question of his own. This isn't all that surprising considering the fact that we too are often faced with unexpected questions in our lives when we are faced with having to make terrible or tricky choices. “Governor,” says Jesus, “why do you ask your question? Do you think I am a king, or were you told I am a king?”

Pilate may have wondered, “is this man before me demonstrating stupidity, insolence, or strength?” But he plays the situation with humor and skill — it is, after all, just a game to him. With slight irritation and perhaps a smirk, he replies, “How should I know? Am I one of your people? Your people, your leaders, brought you here to me.” Then getting to the serious point, he asks, “What have you done?” The expectation of the most powerful man in Judea, the representative of Emperor Tiberius, is that Jesus will answer directly. Unsurprisingly, Jesus does not! Instead he replies that he is a king, but from another world!.

Ahhhh. Another world. Hmmm. A game is afoot. This amusing man is harmless, and may not be right in the head. So Pilate displays some sportsmanship. Jesus is no threat. The peace is kept. There's no justification for killing him. It's an easy choice. But at the end of this little interview, Pilate rhetorically asks Jesus, "What is truth?"

What is truth? Truth for Pilate was being sensible and judicious under the circumstances. It's not a serious question. It's an unimportant and dismissive question. It's a games question. It's a sports question. It's a question like "Who's gonna' win the football game tonight? Or who's going to win the MVP award?"

But there is another answer, because there is such a thing as godly truth, as opposed to gaming truth. As it was, Pilate had godly truth standing there right in front of him, but he was so distracted by playing the game of keeping his post, and keeping the peace, that he missed it. He loses his footing, he drops the ball, he strikes out — because in making the wrong choice about Jesus, he loses power and he ultimately loses his life.

Jesus, the gospels tell us — is the way, the truth, and the life. That's the truth that Pilate has missed in his gamesmanship. It may be that we, too, miss this truth when we become so pressured by the difficult choices we are faced with in life that we forget, or never notice, that Christ is standing with us, beside us, and among us, as he told us he would. In life we are not abandoned. God is present with us always.

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. Only let our choices be truth-seeking, not game-playing. 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 even prevented a riot. Who knows, but what we do know is 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 choosing to do what is ultimately right. Making the right choice isn't always easy or popular. But sometimes that is what is expected of us as followers of Christ.

Jesus' answer to Pilate's inquiry about his kingship must have hit home, stabbing deeply beneath Pilate's thin protective shell of official duty. I have come, Jesus declares, to "testify to the truth" as he affirms that "everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." But disciples are not automatically assigned a high moral character. Nor do they automatically receive a heightened sense of truth, integrity, or rightness when they join the church. The struggle to hear Jesus' voice of truth remains, one which takes our full attention for the entire duration of our discipleship

So what's the hardest thing for us? Is it learning to forgive when we are hurt? Apologizing when we would rather not? Raising our children with unconditional love, kindness, and acceptance every day, tirelessly? Loving our enemies, both foreign and domestic? Having courage and faith in the face of a loved one'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. Yes, God expects us to step into the batter's box and take a swing, but we should keep in mind that God also expects us to remember and believe that he is right there with us to help us hit that homerun! So...on this Christ the King Sunday, let us claim that promise and truly believe that God is present with us always. And thanks be to God for that Amen..