

I was watching some college football games last week, and when I watch football I usually don't just watch one game, I flip around the channels and am watching three, four, maybe even five games at a time. It drives Maria crazy when I do that.....Well, as I was flipping through the sports channels I came across a game that involved two losing teams. Neither team has had a very good year, and I wondered why they'd even broadcast this game. But since both teams desperately needed a win, both teams took a lot of gambles. So it was pretty interesting. When it was fourth down, both sides more often than not, went for it.

Conventional coaching wisdom says that on 4th down you punt the ball back to your opponent, play the field position game, and put the outcome in the hands of your defense. That's the safe play, the conservative play, the one that makes former coaches sitting up in the press box happy. Fans, on the other hand, are usually adamant about going for it. An old coaching adage says that if you coach by listening to the fans, you'll probably lose your job and wind up being one of them. But in the case of fourth and one yard to go, economist David Romer of the University of California has put together some data that says the fans are usually right.

Romer's research concludes that, on average, teams that take the risk of going for it on fourth down seem to win more often than they lose. This should be good news to all those screaming fans, but Romer says that even the fans might be too conservative. His calculations show that teams should be regularly going for it on fourth down, even if it's early in the game, even if the score is tied, and even if the ball is on their side of the field. Backed by independent analyses that support his findings, Romer reports that football coaches don't challenge his research. Yet, despite all of that data, coaches still call out the punt team in most fourth-down situations. In fact, after Romer published his findings a couple of years ago, coaches have seemed to become even more conservative in their play calling. "It used to be that going for it on fourth down was the macho thing to do," says Romer, "Now going for it is the egghead thing to do."

Truth is that coaches now seem to be neither, and the reason may have something to do with human behavior in general. Even though people say they have a certain goal and say that they will do anything to achieve it, their actual behavior regularly deviates from the best path to reach that goal. Whether it's a football coach, a military general, or the CEO of a corporation, leaders are reluctant to take risks. Romer's theory is that it's because leaders have different goals from the people who work for them, or the fans that are watching. Everyone wants to win, but leaders are held to different standards from followers – especially when they lose, and especially when they lose by doing something that few others are doing.

The point here may be like what the analysts up in the press box say about a team that is holding onto a lead late in the game – there's a big difference in playing to win versus

playing not to lose. Have you ever watched a team play with a lead, that seemed like it was playing not to lose, what usually happens? They lose.

Wayne Stewart, who teaches management at Clemson University, backs Romer's conclusions when applied to business. While owners and fans are usually focused on outcomes, managers and coaches are more often focused on not screwing up. According to Stewart, successful managers and coaches understand that fear of failure is often the primary cause of failure itself. More often than not, it is risk that is the path to reward, whether you're talking about football, finance, or faith.

And maybe it's especially applicable to faith. Our old testament reading for today, the classic story of Jacob wrestling with God at the ford of the Jabbok river almost reads like one of those old National Football League films, with the deep voiced narrator and the military music in the background.

Here is one man....alone...Jacob on the Jabok...facing insurmountable odds.....in a life-and-death struggle....with the entire season on the line.

Up until this point in his life, Jacob was more prone to punt than go for it. He had tricked his older twin brother out of his birthright in a moment of weakness, then worked an end around on his brother Esau with the help of his mother Rebekah, to force a turnover of the family blessing from Esau to himself. Jacob's response to his brother's anger was to flee the country. Then, after getting tricked himself by his wife's father to marry the older sister first, Jacob again runs away, now with his second wife to avoid working for his uncle anymore. Like a coach who acts conservatively in the face of diversity, Jacob seems to have always taken the safe way out.

But now, in our text for today, Jacob is stuck with a decision. He couldn't go back where he came from or he'd lose everything he had worked for, and he couldn't move forward without the risking death at the hands of his brother.

For Jacob, it's 4th and one. What do you do?

Well as the story goes, Jacob was left alone that night, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. Somehow Jacob knows that the one who has lined up against him there on that desert playing field, was God in human form, who has come to force the issue. Will Jacob punt again? Or will he struggle through this challenge, and risk getting pummeled by this adversary in order to win a greater blessing?

We know that Jacob chose to stay engaged in the wrestling match. Jacob wrestles hard all night, and just before daybreak when the man Jacob wrestled with wants him to let go, Jacob won't stop until the final whistle. Choosing to risk even death in order to be right with God, he says, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." It would have been easy to punt in the face of such opposition, but Jacob decides to go for it.

Jacob seems to realize that a blessing for him, would result in a fresh set of downs, a new start, a renewed confidence that despite all that had happened in his life, God's covenant promises were going to be realized through this new man with a new name, and he is given a new name, Israel.

If he can just make that last yard, Jacob knows that meeting with his brother would not result in defeat, but reconciliation. And when they finally do meet the next day, and Esau responds with love instead of hatred, it's no coincidence that Jacob says to his brother, "to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

Many of us today may feel like it's fourth down and long, and we're faced with the decision as to what our next play will be, we're faced with challenges to wrestle with. We wrestle with illness and death.

We wrestle with decisions about our work and about our finances.

We wrestle with family issues and how to care for our parents and our children.

We wrestle with forgiveness and reconciliation.

We wrestle with our willingness to trust God.

We stay up at night and can't sleep because of the adversary we face.

Many times Jacob would punt in these situations, but this time he went for it on fourth down. He got a little dinged up in the process, but his injury was no sign of weakness, if anything it was a badge of courage. It was a constant reminder that when we're willing to struggle, to risk, to wrestle with God through adversity..... we find God's glory shining on us on the other side. I think that's what Paul meant when he told the Philippians to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. God's gift of grace is free, but it doesn't come cheap.

The more we risk in following God through the difficult times in our lives, in the lives of our congregations, and in the face of a difficult world, the more we risk in following God, the more we begin to see the promises of God at work in our lives.

The woman in our gospel lesson that we heard of in the children's sermon kept bothering the judge, until she was finally granted justice. Each day she went for it.

In Paul's letter to Timothy, Paul writes, "I solemnly urge you, proclaim the message, be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable, convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. He's saying, "Go for it, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed.

And Jacob, after years of running away finally confronted his destiny and went for it. And that is what we are challenged to do today. To wrestle with God over whatever is challenging to you right now. We may come away limping, but we also come away with victory. People of God, it's fourth down, let's go for it! Amen.