

Mariano Rivera plays baseball for a living. He is a pitcher. He is a specialty pitcher, limiting his work to the end of close baseball games, pitching for one or two innings. He is a "closer", meaning he only pitches at the end of games when the score is close. He is brought in during the most pressure-packed times of the game, when the work of his team up to that point is all on the line. In "postseason" baseball, which we can now watch as the World Series unfolds, he has "saved" 34 of 36 games, allowing less than one run, on average, for every inning pitched. (A "save" happens when a pitcher enters a game and his team is ahead in the score, and that pitcher doesn't allow the other team to score enough runs to win the game. Hence, he "saves" the game for his team.) Rivera is without a peer in the exclusive club of great "closers." There is just one problem: he is a Yankee.

I normally enjoy cheering against the Yankees as much as I enjoy cheering for the Brewers. But, I read an article on Mariano Rivera recently in a sports magazine which has given me pause in my "anti-cheering" plans for the current World Series. Mariano, it turns out, was a good but not great pitcher until one day in 1997 when, without explanation, the baseball came out of his hand with a very strange motion. At first, his coaches tried to get him to stop throwing the ball in such an unusual way, because the catcher couldn't figure out how to catch the ball. But then a light went on. If the pitch couldn't be caught, then it couldn't be hit either. Mariano Rivera throws a "cut fastball" that is nearly impossible to hit, and he has made millions of dollars with a pitch he never intended to throw. How did the pitch come to be?

Mariano gives all of the credit to God. He says without hesitation that it is a gift from God. His right arm is now called "The Hammer of God." (I don't really like the theological implications of attributing that name to a baseball pitcher's arm, but that is the topic for another forum.) The point is that Mariano Rivera believes he was chosen by God for this particular role in life: throwing nearly unhittable baseball to millionaire hitters who swing and miss, and miss, and miss. In fact, the pitch is so good that the strategy of some hitters is to simply not swing, and hope for a walk.

And here's the clincher for me. Mariano remains humble throughout his 2 innings of work. He doesn't show off. He doesn't strut and preen. Mariano is focused on one thing: getting his pitch across the little plate, and hopefully on the black stripes surrounding it. He is disciplined. He is patient. And this is the model of a disciple of Christ. Humble, focused, disciplined, patient. It almost makes me want to cheer for him.

But, he's a Yankee! And I really like the story of Phillies closer, Brad Lidge, (who, you may remember from an earlier edition of this series, has an interesting story as well.) So, here's my decision. I am cheering against the Yankees, but when Rivera is closing for the Yankees, I will sit back and enjoy a man at work who believes that his every pitch is a gift from God. And I will watch the hitter who may have prayed for the gift to hit that pitch...and I will just have to see how God works it out! I don't suppose that God is a Yankees fan, nor a Phillies fan. But I do think God enjoys receiving the glory for the great things His children do in His name.

Whatever your vocational calling might be, you can learn something from watching Rivera pitch. Even if you don't like baseball, watch the last two innings of a close game; watch this man deal with the pressure of a world of baseball eyes on him. I promise you it will be worth your time.

Enjoy the Series!

Shalom,

Bill