

How the NFL Taught Us Empathy Through Injury

Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of Jesus Sunday

January 8, 2023

Pastor John Klawiter, Preaching

Grace and peace to you my siblings in Christ,

On Monday night, I was driving to pick up Evie from dance when I flipped the game on the radio.

The very first play I heard was the only play that I heard. The Bengals completed a pass and Tee Higgins was tackled in the middle of the field. The defender stood up, I was told, but then fell down.

While they tended to the injury, the radio went to commercial.

After the break, the radio announcers, Kevin Harlan and Kurt Warner, explained that an ambulance was on the field and weren't sure what to make of the scene playing out before them.

When I got home, I turned off the radio and headed inside, planning to turn on the game after the kids were asleep.

I was in the basement and Taryn called me from upstairs. Did you hear what happened?

Yeah, I knew that a player was hurt.

No, they suspended the game. Eventually, they'd call it off entirely. Something was really really wrong.

I turned on the tv to see the shocked and emotional faces of Buffalo and Cincinnati players (**Josh Allen and Burrow**).

Everyone just started praying (**slide**).

Even Bengals fans who came to the stadium with signs encouraging their team... pivoted to a sign of prayer for Buffalo and Damar Hamlin (**slide**).

Nobody knew what exactly happened, but judging by the reactions of the players, it certainly wasn't good.

Eventually, we learned that Damar had suffered a heart attack and was in critical condition at a Cincinnati hospital (**slide outside hospital**). He needed CPR on the field—in front of his teammates. He had to be brought back to life, twice—and his survival was much in doubt.

The following day, analysts who usually talked about the weekend games and the importance of the upcoming games, were left without words. Then, Dan Orlovsky's faith compelled him to do something. **VIDEO of Orlovsky**

Let this moment sink in. (**Picture of his Tweet**)

Notice how his hosts agreed. Sometimes, as Christians, we get too sensitive about other people being offended by prayer that we get offended thinking others are offended.

Orlovsky just did what needed to be done. It wasn't perfect or scripted. He didn't offend anyone. He didn't make anyone feel excluded. He expressed what was on his heart.

His words of prayer weren't much different than mine as I went to bed Monday night and thought about Damar in the days that followed.

When he shared that clip on his Twitter feed later, he added the verse "**Matthew 18:20**".

²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Orlovsky acknowledged that God was there. God was among them.

He said what everyone was feeling. He did what was in his heart. He prayed earnestly and with sincerity for a fellow human being.

I don't know what kind of church he belongs to. I don't know if we'd agree theologically. Honestly, it doesn't matter. As a brother in Christ, he modeled his faith in a way that showed the world that we can trust in God.

Damar Hamlin suffered a fatal accident on that field and nobody knew whether he'd live or die.

Instead of being hopeless, Orlovsky offered a word to God.

So we waited.

Then, the news broke on Thursday that Hamlin was still in critical condition, but he could communicate. His first non-verbal message was "did we win?"

His doctors said, "Yes, Damar, you won. You won the game of life."

By Friday, the breathing tube was pulled and as his teammates gathered for a meeting, he appeared on the screen and made the symbol of a heart. Then, barely audible, he said "Love you boys."

The room lost it. He's going to live. There brother had miraculously survived.

I've been thinking about Damar a lot this week. It's not a sports story.

What I've witnessed since Monday are Holy Spirit moments all over the place.

This is a story about belonging. About love.

It's a story about ordinary heroes, like the Bills trainer **Denny Kellington**, who began CPR as fast as possible—likely preserving Damar's life, but also ability to fully recover brain function.

Grown men, known for playing a brutal sport, were reduced to tears and hugging each other as they watched Damar loaded up... not knowing if he'd ever come back.

We saw empathy. We saw that the game didn't matter. Fantasy football. Gambling. Playoff standing... none of the things that typically drive decisions became secondary to Damar's life.

This is society at its best—an example of how humanity can care for each other.

This is how Christ intended us to love our neighbor. To care for a stranger we've never met. To be moved by the precious nature of life.

When Christ began his public ministry, **he appeared at the Jordan River (Jordan River)** where John is baptizing—an act of repentance.

John immediately insists “no, I should be baptized by YOU!”

But for Jesus, this baptism is about more than just water and repentance. It’s about belonging.

The Son of God, come to earth, is part of our collective community. His baptism is about fulfilling righteousness—this is the right thing to do—but it’s about being together with fellow believers and taking part in the same ritual.

John agrees—and in turn, the heavens open up. The largesse. The grandness of God is at play.

That’s what baptism is—a promise that something bigger is involved. That God is present and we are witnesses to that action.

But we aren’t passive witnesses.

Faith celebrated 27 newly baptized members into the church last year. That is a lot of responsibility for us! Today, we add Charlie Frost to the list.

The parents and sponsors have a **long list of responsibilities**... but we have them, too.

People of God, do you promise to support name/s and pray for them in their new life in Christ?

We do.

There are two verbs—we have something to do. First, **Support**.

That means we’ve added 27 more members to support.

And **pray**. 27 more names to pray for.

27 more people that now belong to the body of Christ.

And if we’re going to support those 27, we might as well keep our eyes open for others in need of support and prayer.

Before you know it, all of this belonging and witness of God's grandeur takes over our lives. We can't help but support and pray for others.

Like our neighbors in Saint Paul who received the hundreds of blankets and winter weather supplies from Faith Lutheran in less than a month.

Or like the way we creatively support new ways to care for creation—**with shopping bags to reduce plastic**. This group has been dedicated and becoming more organized in this important ministry.

And of course, prayer. Through our prayer lab minutes, through the prayers of the people, through the regular prayer chain emails, through our personal conversations with God... and of course, in those moments where crisis happens—**even to a complete stranger (picture of Hamlin)**, yet we know what to do.

We pray.

Last night, Hamlin made his first post on social media on his Twitter handle @hamlinisland, **The love is felt and extremely real. No matter race or religion everybody coming together in prayer.**

Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

God's here. Among us. Isn't it remarkable to belong to something this big... and yet Christ loves each and every one of us. God calls us by name. You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased. Amen.