

The Steve Bartman Story

America is a baseball culture. My brother and I did our part by participating in that great game growing up. Our first hero was Harmon Killebrew of the Washington Senators (because until I was nine we lived outside Washington, D.C.) followed by the legendary Mickey Mantle, Roger Marris, Willie Mays and Yogi Bera. We read books and watched movies about baseball. We read of Babe Ruth and my favorite player of all time was Lou Gehrig. I read his life story and learned some character lessons from him. If you want to see a true American classic, find the video "The Pride of the Yankees" in which Gary Cooper plays Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth plays himself. My brother and I played Little League, we listened to the games on the radio and when I was nine we moved to Lakeland, Florida, the spring training home of the Detroit Tigers. How often we would go to Bryant Stadium and watch the Tigers practice. Baseball is and was for us the American pastime.

It's October and soon we will be involved in yet another world series. Today, I want to discuss one of the more bizarre, sad and yet insightful events that came to us from the world of baseball. It is the Steve Bartman incident. The date was October 14, 2003, Wrigley Field in Chicago. It was the eighth inning. Mark Prior was pitching for Chicago, Lou Castillo of the Marlins was up to bat, Juan Pierre was on second. Chicago led Florida 3-0. They were five outs away from clinching the championship and going to the World Series for the first time since 1945 and they had not won a World Series since 1908! To say things were optimistically tense would have been a serious understatement. Prior made the pitch, Castillo connected and hit the ball toward the left field corner, going foul. Many fans reached for the ball, however it was Steve Bartman's contact with the ball in an attempt to catch this foul ball that will go down in Chicago Cubs infamy. Moisés Alou approached the wall, jumped, and reached for the ball. Bartman's hand deflected it away. Alou slammed his glove down in frustration and was seen shouting at several fans. The Cubs argued for interference, but umpire Mike Everitt ruled there was no fan interference because the ball had broken the plane of the wall separating the field of play from the stands and entered the stands. The Marlins went on to score 8 runs and won the sixth game and then on to win the seventh game, securing the National League Championship and going on to defeat the Yankees in the World Series. As of 2011, the Cubs have not yet won the National League Championship and it is now over one hundred years since they have won a World Series.

Steve Bartman was only twenty-six years old when this happened. Immediately, the media kept replaying this over and over again. They captured his appearance and froze it for all time: a young fan sitting there in his Cubs hat, glasses, green turtle neck and ear phones and chewing gum nervously. People came down out of the stands cursing and threatening him. Food and beer were thrown at him from the upper seats and finally, fearing for his safety, security had to escort Bartman off the field and away from the outraged fans, many of whom to this day blame Bartman for the failure of the Cubs to break their losing streak. In the midst of enjoying this years World Series, I would like for us to reflect upon lessons learned from the Steve Bartman story.

1. Everybody makes mistakes.

Steve was doing what you or I or most any baseball enthusiast would have done when a ball is going foul and heading in our direction -- we would try to catch it! He no doubt did not see how close Moisés Alou was to catching the ball. This was not a sin! If anything it was a mistake. People sent death threats and when his address was discovered (he still lived with his parents) he actually had to go into hiding.

Life is full of mistakes we make. If we sin, we should not only repent, but seek restitution if possible. In the case of Bartman, we see a young man, who held down a good job, was a baseball enthusiast and even coached Little League himself. He did no wrong for trying to catch a ball going foul. The most reprimand that he should have received was to be more observant of his environment. He came to the game with no agenda and no maliciousness. As a matter of fact, he was cheering for the Cubs! His dad tried to soften the anger directed toward his son by saying, "I took him to the games growing up (they only lived about five minutes from Wrigley Field); I taught him how to catch a ball in the stands going foul." Steve issued this statement soon after the incident: "There are few words to describe how awful I feel and what I have experienced within these last 24 hours. I am so truly sorry from the bottom of this Cubs fan's broken heart. I ask that Cub fans everywhere redirect the negative energy that has been vented towards my family, my friends, and myself into the usual positive support for our beloved team on their way to being National League champs." He would never make another public statement again.

There is no need for a fine young man like this to live in that kind of remorse. All of us blow it at times. We must go on. Don't allow the Devil to take your mistakes and categorized failures and rub them in your face and try to make your future useless. He is a liar and the father of lies, Jesus said. So let the truth make you free! (John 8:32,36). My advice is to stay faithful to God when circumstances have risen against you, and wait for your opportunities to arrive. Then, by God's grace, shake this thing that hangs over your head. The Bible says, "*I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all*" (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Your time will come!

2. Don't live superstitiously.

The Bartman experience was not the first "bad luck omen" that the Cubs have lived with. It goes all the way back to 1945. It's called "The Curse of the Billy Goat" and was supposedly placed on the Chicago Cubs when Billy Goat Tavern owner Billy Sianis was asked to leave a game against the Detroit Tigers at the Cubs' home ground of Wrigley Field because his pet goat was eating other fans' hot dogs. He was outraged and declared, "Them Cubs, they aren't gonna win no more," which has been interpreted to mean that there would never be another World Series game won at Wrigley Field." There have been different interpretations of it, but that is the summation -- no more World Series won. Baseball announcers have kept this silly superstition alive and Bartman's left

palm had no sooner deflected the ball and announcers began to say, the curse continues.

People by nature are superstitious, but we who are Christians have been delivered from this rule. *“Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious”* (Acts 17:22). *“Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world”* (I John 4:4). We live by the Providence of a loving God, not the luck of arbitrary gods of superstition!

3. Be kind. What goes around comes around.

The now defrocked Governor Rod Blagojevich declared after the game, Bartman “will never get a pardon from this governor!” When this governor was caught in error, he received no pardon. Jesus said, *“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy”* (Matthew 5:7).

4. Determine what is important and what is not important in life.

In the sphere of all that is important in life, where does baseball fit in? If the outcome of a game is so important that your life is altered, be careful; you have allowed this to become an idol in your life! It's just a game. It is a pastime. You know what should be important in life? God and your relationship with Him, your family and your church. Being faithful, prayerful, being a witness, being honest, being hard working, being forgiving, being Christ-like and being a good citizen.

To those who read this (I would hope that includes Steve Bartman himself) I would say, get over the things that are not important in life and dwell on things that really matter. Live right and claim the words of Jesus, *“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you”* (Matthew 6:33).

- Pastor Pope -