My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our grateful hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Do we remember what we read about last week? (take all answers). We read from the letter to the Hebrews, a very curious letter of unknown authorship which brings up all kinds of issues of perseverance, sacrifice, discipline, and upright living. The list of these qualities brings to mind the qualities for which we all wish to strive. And it also brought to mind for me the recent induction of David Ortiz into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

How should we measure greatness in a baseball player? In an increasingly statistic-obsessed baseball pundit world, we might believe that the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame determines a player’s historical greatness in a straightforward manner, defining it as apparent playing talent demonstrated over time, confirmed by hit and home run records, number of stolen bases, or pitching statistics of the game.

But the Hall of Fame doesn’t exactly see it that way. Great ballplayers, in Hall of Fame terms, are those arguably worthy of holding the status of hero, persons who are credits not just to their teams, but also to the game, and perhaps even their country, their race, and a credit to the human condition itself.

“Voting shall be based upon the player’s record,” but also “playing ability, integrity, sportsmanship, character, and contributions to the team(s) on which the player played.” So few words, and so much vagueness. So much room for argument and ambiguity. It’s a good thing lawyers aren’t in charge of this process. We should guess a player’s record means accumulated career accomplishments, and “playing ability” means degree of superiority in talent and skill compared to other players. But what are the qualities of “integrity, sportsmanship and character” as they apply to a major league player?

Some of us might answer, “Who cares?” Some analysts regard all references to character as subjective and irrelevant, and cite the changing standards of our culture to bolster their argument that such things have nothing to do with baseball greatness. But there is more to being a great ballplayer than an outstanding Wins Against Replacement (WAR), or what a player’s comparative value is in relationship with all other player. And it also means there are key qualities of the Hall of Fame’s definition that can’t be quantified with a calculator. Now, hang with me here.

We know what bad conduct is, right? Cheating or fixing a game, dishonest use of drugs to enhance performance, attacking fans or umpires or fellow team-mates, and breaking any manner of laws that hurt other people. But we also know what good conduct is. Team leadership, courage under duress, personal integrity, authenticity, charity.

It seems as if folks can figure out pretty quickly what should be admired qualities of living, because they can apply them to baseball players being heroes and well as they can to their own life, liberty, and pursuit of family.

But it is totally vexing that folks fail to understand that these qualities of noble living have their origins in our text today. It’s not a stretch to say that the same criteria that ultimately determines whether a person gets into the Hall of Fame stems from biblical principles.

But there is a crucial difference between Christian criteria of admired folks and those whom the Baseball Writers’ Association of America deems worthy of being enshrined forever after in Cooperstown, NY.

Let’s think about some heroes of the Bible. Moses. Abraham. Jacob. David.

What do we know about these guys? Are they paragons of virtue? Hardly. All of them did things which would have disqualified them outright from the world’s Hall of Fame voting, and maybe they would not have even made the ballot. At one point or another in their lives they were liars, thieves, murderers, adulterers, and none of them would have been named Father of the Year.

And yet…they are in our text last week and this week. This may be the single biggest chasm between how Christians live their life and how others laugh at us for living our life. Don’t we see the hypocrisy, others say, of our list of admired people, and how badly flawed they are? Don’t we understand that it’s beyond foolish to expect that we should be perfect when our heroes are so far from being that way? Why, they say, do we even waste our time?

Why do we even try?

I think we do so because, as Christians, we understand the promises of God, those things that do not interest the world’s pantheon of greats. What, precisely are the promises of God that make us come here to worship each week? Two things:

1. I will always love you, having created you and chosen you for peace and purpose. Know that.
2. I will never leave you, and I’ll forgive you even when you feel alone and unforgiven. Try again.

We do this because God forgives our debts first, and then expects us to do likewise in forgiving our debtors. We know that God will not lead us into temptation, we do that alllll on our own. But God will deliver us from our worst impulses, those things the ancients call “evil”, and we get a second chance. And a third. And maybe more.

We give our life to a God who gives us life, but one in which we don’t try for fame, fortune, honor, and glory. We come here to renew ourselves in God’s promises, and look around to see that others, too, are here, just as imperfect as we are, and coming also for renewal. All of this is life in God, that God will not do what we want, but that God will always do and guide us to what is right.

And I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

That’s the life of faith. Knowing that the promises of God are fulfilled in us, but so easily forgotten and trod on by our own desires that we need reminders of that grace upon grace.

We need heroes, but ones which look like us. Ones which don’t live up to perfection, but are flawed. Ones that we can relate to as loved, forgiven, and loved again by God.

We have faith that we are loved by God. But like most baseball players that don’t make the Hall of Fame, we still strive for certain ways of living that help us while we help others. But we also make room for forgiveness, knowing that we are never defined by our best or worst moments in life. That we can recover our grace, our hope, and our courage to move forward. Because it’s not about being in the Hall of Fame. It’s about being in the messy and abundant life right here, right now.

And for that, Thanks be to God, Amen.