

“March Madness”

Yep, it's March Madness time of the year...as in the month of March and the madness that comes with it for those who are basketball aficionados. This weekend is the Sweet Sixteen, which as Zack was explaining to me, is the part of the March Madness tourney that narrows sixteen teams down to eight, which will be followed by narrowing it to four and then ultimately, crowning a victor. Now while I am not one of them basketball aficionados, which is why Zack had to do some 'splain'n to me, I do know one thing...and that is that Doug Kauffmann is a Duke fan and so I know he is watching it with great anticipation. I think I have known that about Doug since the very first day I met him some sixteen years ago. Well...good luck for all you March Madness fans.

But actually, March Madness comes in many forms...like driving to the office this morning with the sun not yet cracking the horizon. I was here at 7:00 to write this article for all my loyal readers. I have to get here early cause once the ladies in the office arrive and start their day, there is little or no peace and tranquility thereafter. And when I sit down to write, I have to complete it all at one time 'cause I'm a bit ADD I think, as interruptions of any kind throw me way off track. So, driving to the office this morning, the beautiful horizon was ablaze with the glory of the Lord of Creation as He displayed His creative splendor through the gorgeous sunrise. And all the while, in the predawn darkness as I drove, I could hear gobbler after gobbler stirring the morning stillness with gobbles reverberating off every rock, tree and hillside, as he welcomes the new day and the business at hand. But, by the very fact that I was driving my car and only hearing them in my imaginations, I was experiencing March Madness in a whole different way...wanting to be in the turkey woods, but having to be at work. That's what I'm talk'n about...March Madness!

But, there are so many ways to experience March Madness other than with basketball and turkey hunting. My good friend Chuck Sprouse has his bass boat all ready to go and he's given me the go ahead to come get it and go fishing for spot bass that are biting at Lake Russell. And what makes me especially want to do so is listening to Michael Allen, pastor at McCormick First, talk about the fish he caught Friday, ninety something. And if hearing that isn't March Madness enough, hearing that he practices "catch and release" is the epitome of madness, as he threw everyone of them boogers back. Now as one who practices "catch and eat," it was doubly maddening to not be fishing. And why am I not fishing, cause I have been building my grand's gargantuan tree house and it seems to consume my free time. But at last I am at a point where all the gadgets are on the tree house, the rock climbing wall, the slide, swings, trapeze bar, etc., etc., so the grands can now use it. But still, I have to finish it! And with the gobblers gobbling and the bass biting, I am experiencing March Madness without ever watching a basketball game.

But that's not all, you see another form of March Madness is trying, on top of everything else, to find time to plant that garden I spoke of two months ago, as well as get some chicks from Todd Calhoun to add to my chicken egg production. You

see, when it comes to hunting, gardening and chicken egg production, it becomes apparent that eating is a big part of the Little family makeup. We like to eat, and as good fortune would have it, the First Lady of the Little household, Mrs. Kim, or "Granny" as she is called these days, loves to cook. So when you gots somebody who loves to cook living in the same household with folks who love to eat, well, that there's a match made in heaven, or in my case, made at the altar nearly thirty-five years ago. But keeping up with the (all natural) food production this time of year can definitely be a form of March Madness to say the least.

But on top of all these other forms of March Madness, there is one that I am experiencing that is more maddening than all the others. Do you recall in II Corinthians, when the Apostle Paul was recounting all his struggles, three shipwrecks, imprisonment, beatings, lashings, and many other terrible things, but then at the conclusion, Paul basically said, "And besides all these, I have the concern for the church." That's right, Paul's concern for the church, was as painful a struggle as all the other actual physical forms of struggle he had experienced. Paul desperately cared for Christ's church and wanted each of them to excel.

I must admit, Paul's care and concern for multiple churches is the heart of an Associational Missionary. I too, feel that way! When I was a pastor, my responsibilities primarily lay with one church, but as an Associational Missionary, my concern is for all the churches in my care. And I spend many a sleepless night contemplating the churches in our association's spiritual and physical condition, especially those trending downward. For instance, it is heart wrenching to see the stats that in the last ten years, with all the gifted pastors and preaching of the Word and mission endeavors, programs, events, discipleship emphasis, etc., activities that so many of our churches are engaged in, yet still, there are today over 3000 fewer members of the churches in the Lakelands than there were ten years ago. While some churches grow, others decline, and some of our churches grow at the expense of a sister church's decline, because we, like so many American churches, simply rotate members between ourselves. And that can be seen in the dismal baptism rate, which has declined by 39% in the last eight years. And the Association's ability to continue to meet the ever growing needs of churches in survival mode is in peril, as financial gifts to the Association have also declined sharply over the past couple of years. In my own way, I am experiencing a bit of March Madness, as I contemplate the future of our churches and this association, if things continue as they are.

One of my favorite movies is Hacksaw Ridge, a true story about a medic who refused to carry a gun into battle, who exemplifies the church better than most modern day pictures I can draw for you. The main character, Desmond Doss, shows courage, determination, bravery in the midst of insurmountable odds, and a commitment to save "just one more." He prayed, "Lord, help me to save just one more," and as he prayed that prayer all night, he rescued seventy-five wounded soldiers, all while dodging Japanese soldiers trying to kill him. Perhaps many of our churches should rally around the cry of Desmond Doss, "Just one more Lord, just one more!"