

Sermon - 5th Easter
John 15:1-8
April 29, 2018

“Living Under a No Trade Clause”

When I played little league baseball we'd sometimes tell a teammate who was having a bad day that he ought to be traded for a bag of batting practice balls. The joke would get laughs from the guys and a dirty look from our coach. But the case of John C. Odom is no laughing matter. John was a 26 year old minor league baseball player - not a great prospect but good enough to hang around the low minor leagues for 4 years. In the spring of 2008 he was released from the San Francisco Giants farm system, picked up briefly by a team in Canada, then traded for 10 baseball bats. It's the kind of story that makes the wires on slow news days and earns a few laughs when you're talking baseball on summer evenings.

It was only funny until John Odom died that fall from an overdose of drugs and alcohol. How John Odom came to be traded for baseball bats is complicated. The minor league teams involved didn't intend to embarrass him, but fans at the ballparks he played in after the trade sure did. John Odom had his minor league contract purchased in an unusual way, for bats valued at about what minor league contracts are often purchased for in cash as teams shuffle players around, hoping someone else's castoff may be their next star. But John Odom had a troubled past- including an assault conviction when he was still in high school. Those who knew him are not surprised that his worth as a baseball player, and by extension a human being, having been pegged at the cost of ten maple bats, pushed him over the edge.

The story of John Odom's life might be spun as being about the premium we place on competition and goals or how hard it is when our dreams go unattained. But the story behind this story is how many times each day someone equates a failure to succeed with being a failure as a person. It's about how we are so prone to make and so vulnerable to self-assessments of our self-worth – whether intellectually, economically, socially or athletically. And how many times someone, especially young men and women, conclude they don't measure up or can't keep up, so no one will miss them – and so they bow out and become at best unproductive and aimless, or worse let a night of opioids and booze take them out, like John Odom did.

The tragedy of the story of John Odom the baseball player might have been avoided if he'd heard the story John the disciple of Jesus told. The John who once overheard Jesus say; *“if a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers.”* Eugene Peterson, in his modern paraphrase of the Bible entitled “The Message”, translated John 15:6, that latter part of that quote from our lesson this way; *“When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation is intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood”*. John Odom died mistakenly thinking he was only worth a few pieces of dried wood.

What if to those fans who had taunted and called him “batman” or the guy who once played the “Batman” theme over the PA system when he entered a game – John could have told them to cool it because he knew who he was - not a bat, but a branch, connected for eternity to the life affirming and life enriching vine Jesus Christ? What about you - what about those days when you're sin has you stuck in neutral or shame throws you into reverse - what if you could say that?

In truth, guys like John Odom are not so different from you and me. John the aspiring starting pitcher just needed a reliever, that's all, and either there was no one to summon that reliever for him or John was simply too trapped in his hurt to accept any relief. If only John Odom had remembered that Jesus was “valued” once too - exchanged for 30 pieces of silver, about a day's wage - which figures out to a lot less than what 10 baseball bats are worth by the way. If only he knew how much Jesus knew about being taunted. If only.

Jesus abided in his Father and despite what he suffered his life already “glorified” God. There is nothing so important as that you accept the same is true for you - your life glorifies God and God abides in you by choice. Jesus said in John 15:16; “*You did not choose me, but I choose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.*” Can you accept so marvelous a promise as this - that Jesus abides with you because he wants to, and wants you to remain in him for your sake, not just his? To put it another way, can you accept that you live with a “no trade clause?”
AMEN

