

Sermon – 8th Pentecost
Romans 8:28-39 and Matthew 13:44-52
July 26, 2020

“Wanna Trade...?”

As a kid I collected baseball cards – we used to call them “trading cards.” Amid endless hours of maintaining card checklists and ingesting player statistics, I believe collecting baseball cards taught characteristics of the Kingdom of God. It taught you to wait. The corner grocery store three blocks from my house was where me and my trading buddies got our cards. We’d wait all winter but by early spring we’d stop in the store after school and peer over the counter to see if there was a box of baseball cards on the shelf between the Hershey and Baby Ruth bars. We should have known they didn’t come out until a few weeks after the baseball season had begun and card companies had time to take photos of all the players who were going to be on a team’s roster that season. Practically every day we’d stop and ask Mrs. Kreyer of Kreyer’s Grocery if the cards were in...often she’d say “not yet guys...not just yet.”

Romans the 8th chapter says Christians “wait” in expectation for the Kingdom to be revealed. That was the gist of last week’s lesson, and this week the author of Romans - the Apostle Paul, doubles down on that notion of waiting by detailing all the hardships of life that would sorely tempt us to become weary of the wait and settle for something else. But, he says, the unveiling of God’s rule is worth the wait and any sacrifices necessary to live God’s way of life. *“If we hope for what we do not see”*, (and who hopes for what they see) *“we wait for it patiently.”*

Jesus helps us understand this by telling a parable about treasure in a field. Often, we read the parable of the “hidden treasure” as us finding something of great value (God’s grace) and exchanging everything we have for it. My colleague Kyle Jones this week offered a wonderful perspective on this (you can read his article it in our weekly “Connections”) suggesting *‘we’re’* the treasure Jesus surrenders everything to obtain. Either way, the kingdom of God is “hidden” for a time, it waits to be discovered, or revealed – for us until death it is “not just yet.”

Collecting baseball cards also taught you to establish priorities in life – it would’ve been real easy for us guys to burn through our Christmas gift money – the five bucks your grandparents or Aunt and Uncle put in a card on other neat stuff, but if you were disciplined you’d know to set aside some of that stash for those precious *“5 cents a pack for five cards and stick of bubble gum”* packages of baseball joy.

Moreover, if you wanted to do some serious collecting and trading that summer, you needed volume, enough cards to create leverage to trade a trio of bench warmers for that one guy from your hometown team you just had to have, that you'd so treasure you'd stick that card under your pillow at night. Our Lord in the Parable of the Pearl says the kingdom of God is what we should value and prioritize, even, again, as it can be said that the parable really shows the priority and value Jesus places on you. It is as Paul says in Romans 8:28 - '*God works for the good of those who love him and who are called according to his purpose*'.

Finally, baseball card collecting taught you what to value. By August, the players you weren't really sure you wanted to have in your collection but had five of anyway were often traded by their clubs or sent to the minors. Over the winter, you'd have to decide if they were worth hanging onto at all, and usually your crowded shelf told you it was best to set aside the best of the previous season and let the others find a trashcan.

What held you back though, and thus created not shoe boxes but tubs of baseball cards in your closet was the gnawing feeling that some August cast-off would become next summer's star after he got sent to another team or back to the minors to get control of his fastball. The last thing you'd ever want is to explain why you had, but threw away, the rookie card of a future All Star to your buddies. I guarantee you my older brother wishes he would have kept his early Harmon Killebrew cards, but alas...

Thanks be to God in His Kingdom what to keep, what to "value" is determined by Christ. Romans 8:33 says "*who will bring any charge against God's elect?*" and 8:35 says; "*who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*" Well in truth all sorts of things *bring* "charges" against us. Christians have enemies – cosmically we understand that as the evil one, the devil, who I Peter 5:8 says is like a roaring lion sniffing around for someone to devour.

There are no shortage of cultural enemies of Christianity - indeed culture is one of the best tools in the Devil's bag to condition believers to fashion and settle into a compromised, comfortable, faith, a "*Christian easy chair*" overstuffed with cultural imperatives that exchange success or respectability for discipleship - a faith that challenges few things and so overcomes even fewer.

But Lutherans have always understood that in the end, it is the enemy within, our own sinful flesh, that “charges us” the most. It is as Luther said in his explanation of the 6th Petition of the Lord’s prayer, our sinful selves “*draw us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins.*” Our sinful selves lead us to “value” almost anything *but* God on the one hand, or to “devalue” ourselves to the point of despair on the other. Yet Romans 8 concludes with one of the most sweeping statements of the love of God one could imagine. It says that despite hardships and sacrifice and sins aplenty, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. The kingdom belongs to those whom *Jesus* loves – indeed intercedes on behalf of – sinners like you.

The “Parable of the Net” , the third of three in our lesson from Matthew 13 quite clearly speaks of a decision that awaits each person who ever lived – it hovers over our future - but it is not our decision the parable alludes to but that of the decider. Nothing in the parable suggests the net knows what it should take up, and nothing is said about what constitutes a good fish or a bad one – like weeds and wheat that are allowed to use the same soil, so this parable says “good fish and bad ones” swim freely in the same water. The angels that come with authority to “separate” come on God’s command not of their own authority.

Only God will decide what each person’s destiny is – and God has decided to decide on the basis of his Son, Jesus, who pleads for sinners and died for them. Your faith, whether strong or weak, tempered or true, halting or steadfast, wobbly or sturdy – if it’s in Jesus it’s faith that saves you, that pardons your sin, that exchanges “his goodness” for “your badness”. To understand the ‘Parable of the Net’ and its clear reference to eternity, we must first understand that in Christ’s eyes you are a treasure, a pearl of great price – and that he values you. His decision is final, but his mercy unending.

Dear people, recall once more Romans 8:28 which says “*in everything God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purposes*”. We often miss that grand, stunning promise - “all things”, or “everything” we assume it cannot mean “our things”. But it does. God uses every last moment, event, struggle, failure, tear, hurt, tragedy and triumph to teach us something, usually about his consistent goodness that overcomes our consistent weakness or badness, his complete peace that overcomes our yearning for something this world cannot give.

In my baseball card trading days, I learned three valuable lessons - to wait, to think ahead and establish priorities, and to learn what to value. Today would be a good day for you to think of where and how you rush on ahead of the Lord into something without prayer or time in his Word, how you have let other things not only compete for but crowd out the priorities of God's kingdom in you, how you may have traded the Author of Life for something else in life. In the church we don't call that a personal guilt trip – we call self-examination. Use it please to recall and embrace the promise of a Savior, your Savior, who can't wait to forgive, who without hesitation nor counting the cost, traded his life for yours. Nothing indeed can separate Him from what he loves. AMEN