

“Priceless”

(Mt 5:1-12, 1 Cor 1:18-31, Micah 6:1-8)

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The Stadium Church

I’m a football fan. Less so than I used to be. But on Superbowl Sundays or when the local team was in the playoffs, I was always among the people who enjoyed the old stand-by joke, that church would be shorter today, so that everyone could get home to watch the game.

There is nothing quite as entertaining as a good game. Which I guess is the reason why stadiums across the country are full on Sundays, even though the cheapest seats in the NFL today are at least \$100 each. I googled it and season tickets to the Patriots are between \$750.00 and 2.000.00. Does that sound right? And apparently there is a twenty-year waiting list for those tickets. And if you just go out and buy one on the market, the average ticket price is \$457.00. That would be a lot of money in an offering plate.

I like being swept up in the competitive spirit and I like the experience of being on a team and being committed to a common goal. I like being able to experience beating someone to the ball and breaking free for a touchdown or shrugging it off when you get beaten so you can come

back strong on the next play. Watching a game makes it possible to experience it all through the players.

I also like the way watching a game makes us think about the rest of our lives. It informs the way we choose to behave at work, as “teammates” in a Capitalist society. All the best elements of team sports are present in the Capitalist enterprise. The players have to be disciplined. They have to be well coordinated with each other. They have to be calculating and have good timing. They have to understand their common goal and be creative and resourceful in order to achieve it in the face of competition. And they have to be motivated.

I would guess that sports has played a significant role in motivating the greatest period of innovation and prosperity the world has ever known. And we have been the beneficiaries. It is no wonder that for so many of us, the sports stadium has replaced the church.

Well Regulated Systems

I also believe in good sportsmanship and that it requires good refereeing. And that goes for the economy too. The economy needs good regulations that are fair and that allow everyone to play the game of making a living with freedom and creativity, while at the same time blowing the whistle when players go out of bounds or cheat.

Heightened Intensity

One of the things that makes sports so exciting is that there is only one ball. It's "Winner take all!" which raises the stakes, intensifies the competition and heightens the drama. It makes the highs higher, and the lows lower. After a big game the winners are all cheering joyfully and splashing champagne on each other. For the pros it means fatter pay packets and increased recognition as being "winners."

The TV cameras may pass briefly through the locker room of the "losers" looking despondent as they clean out their lockers. And whether it is true or not, the official story line is: "Winner take all. And losers go home empty-handed. They will have to suck it up until next time, if there is a next time."

A Critique of the Sports Metaphor

I understand that the idea of "Winner take all!" is a good way to make a game more exciting. But I don't agree with it, when it is applied to other areas of our lives and to the economy. When there are several businesses in an area seeking to provide the same services, my preference would be that they be more interested in working together in ways that ensure everyone gets a share of the pie.

I understand that competition is good in the sense that it can weed out inferior products and inferior performance and spur innovation. But it can also weed out good alternatives.

When I was at University, those market forces were at work all along the main street outside the school. And in the space of a few years all the wonderful Mom and Pop businesses had been forced out and replaced by chain stores. All the local charm and friendly relationships between owners and customers that took decades to form had disappeared and the feeling of being a neighborhood had been replaced by stores with lots glass windows and plastic logos, glossy colors, cheapo trendy furniture and strangers wearing McDonald's looking uniforms.

It was "winner take all" all right. But I would have preferred living among the losers and having the old neighborhood back. Now I have no reason to go back there. I wouldn't know anybody and it just looks like every other place. There is nothing there for me.

So, while I appreciate the benefits of Capitalism, I wish we had a kinder, gentler form of it, that wasn't so cutthroat. I guess I have very mixed feelings about many of the results.

I've also come to feel that, although competition, growth and success and winning can be very exciting, none of those things actually mean much to me. I look at our politics and the obsession with winning over working together for everyone's welfare, and it just saddens me how crippling it is for our economy and it makes me sadder still, to see how crippled some of them are as human beings.

It seems to me that a person can be the biggest winner in the world and still be unhappy. And on the flip-side, that a person could live very modestly without any concern for being a winner and be very happy, which is more in line with I think the readings for this morning suggest. After all, it is ultimately what is in our hearts that determines how we feel about life, not what is in our wallets or how many trophies we have on the shelf.

Ferdinand

Over the past twenty years or so, I have come to identify myself with the main character in a children's book called "Ferdinand the Bull." My family has identified me with Eeyore because I mope about the house and say depressing things. But the character I really identify with is Ferdinand.

Ferdinand was a young Bull who lived out in the country on a farm in Spain. He loved to sit out under his tree in the field and smell the flowers. One day some bullfighters from Madrid were passing by looking for a bull to fight in the bull ring in Madrid. And at that moment gentle Ferdinand sat on a bee and got stung on his behind. He leapt up and down, snorting and bucking, and the bullfighters were so impressed that they immediately carted him off to Madrid.

On the day of the bullfights, the bullfighters were sweating buckets and the crowd was on the edge of their seats, waiting for the fearsome Ferdinand to appear. But of course, he had recovered from his bee-sting and returned to being his gentle self. So, instead of terrorizing the bullring and aweing the crowd, he simply sat there looking pleasantly about.

And so the bullfighters put him back in the cart and took him back to the farm and to his tree on the grassy knoll and the sweet smelling flowers that he loved. And there he is enjoying the rest of his days.

The Readings

Now what does all this have to do with today's scriptures? If you look closely, you will see that Ferdinand's hoof prints run through all of them. His lack of interest in being famous in the bullring is reflected in

humility the prophet Micah's call to "love kindness and walk humbly with God."

Ferdinand's humble origins on the farm are also present in Paul's recognition that we are all of humble origins, but that God has chosen the weak to shame the strong. And his appreciation of the flowers in the fields and the simple things in life calls to mind Jesus's words. Blessed are the poor in spirit, "for theirs is the kingdom of God."

When I think of that phrase, it makes me think about these two sides of my own experience. The one side is the fevered and competitive world of capitalism which has given us so much, but which also leaves me and maybe you with mixed feelings. And the other side is the part of me, and perhaps of you too that, like Ferdinand has no desire to look for a fight.

Right there in the field, Ferdinand has all he needs. He is surrounded by the gentle summer breezes, the sweet smell of the flowers, green grass to eat, water from a cool brook and he has time to admire and enjoy it all. And part of the beauty of it all is that these things that bring him the greatest pleasure are free. He doesn't have to fight and struggle and compete in the "bullring", a place his personality was never suited to in the first place.

All the time, the pasture was there to enjoy, not as a reward for “winning”, but just because. As we religious people would say, just because God chose, as a gift of grace, to bless him with it, whether he deserved it or not.

And I think that this is one of the several important things that the beatitude: “Blessed are the poor *in Spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of God,” is saying to us. The rich very often seem to believe that the best things are only available if you have the money to buy them. Everything of value must have a price tag. And so they are consumed by the struggle to increase their wealth in order to purchase what they seek. They lose sight of the fact that the freest and most available things are actually precious.

In contrast to this, the poor have given up on the possibility that they will ever be able to buy anything off the top shelf. And so they are forced to look for the hidden value in ordinary things. They can't afford expensive bottles of wine and so they settle for dipping their ladles into a brook of cold running water instead. And what they may discover is that a cool drink from a mountain stream on a hot day is more delicious than any wine that sits on the top shelf can ever be. And it is

completely free. All you have to do is reach down and scoop it up to have a taste of heaven.

Priceless

There is a Mastercard Ad that goes like this:

Two tickets twenty eight dollars. Two hot dogs, two pop corns and two sodas eighteen dollars. One autographed baseball forty-five dollars. Real conversation with your eleven year old son, priceless!

And then the ad ends with the picture of a Mastercard and the words. "There are some things money can't buy. But for everything else there is Mastercard."

Those ads are pretty amusing today. Two hot dogs, two pop corns and two sodas at a ball game for eighteen dollars? We are talking at least 40 dollars today!

The ad ends by stating a profound truth. The truth is that the opportunity to grow in relationship with a loved one is something money can't buy. It is priceless! But the ad also inserts a deception under the cover of that truth. It is the assumption that Dad still has to go through making all those purchases on his Mastercard, in order to set up the situation in which the priceless conversation with his son can

occur. It is as though that conversation cannot occur unless he first gains his son's good will by showering him with gifts.

In fact it is not true that these "priceless" moments have to somehow be bought. The grace of God by its very nature is free and without conditions. And our relationships with each other should be marked by this same generosity of spirit, extending friendship to each other in a way that specifically does not require a payment in exchange for good will.

Back to the Paddock

When I look at the big picture and at my life, I realize that fighting to have it all is like chasing an illusion. "More is more" can no longer be the assumption that guides me. I have gobbled down too many "bon bons" off the top shelf and they no longer bring me the pleasure they once did. They are just bon bons and the fact that they cost me a lot hasn't brought me any closer to heaven. On the contrary. Now, I am a little bit frightened and intrigued by the possibility of following a new motto, that "Less is more."

I've also had enough of the overstimulation of the bullrings in Madrid. I'm not telegraphing that I want to retire or anything. What I am saying

is that I just want to return to myself and to a place where I can enjoy what God has given us, the way Ferdinand returned to his home.

I'm grateful for my Mastercard. Actually I literally do carry a Mastercard. And I don't ever want to be without some financial assets. But I don't believe that using it is the precondition for my happiness. I don't have any interest in owning mountains of stuff and I do care about living sustainably for the sake of saving this planet. I want to restore my senses to a place where I can recognize and enjoy those priceless riches that are hidden from people who can't see value in anything unless it has a price tag.

I want to live in the Kingdom of Heaven and in order to do that, I need to learn how to appreciate the extent to which blessing is free. And my belief is that God wants that blessing for all of us.