

Memorial Day Weekend has traditionally been a time when America starts paying attention to baseball. College Football doesn't start until August and so we have about 2 months where baseball is our daily sports fix. Plus we have youth all-star teams practicing, travel teams are gearing up and new summer league teams are starting to play. So let's use baseball as a theme for this weeks' readings and thoughts.

Monday, May 28 - Read Nehemiah 8:8-12. Baseball has always thrived on the spirit of people like Kansas Citian Satchel Paige, who said, "I ain't ever had a job, I just always played baseball." Slugger Willie Stargell observed, "When they start the game, they don't yell, 'Work ball.' They say, 'Play ball.'" When Israel returned from exile and God's law was read, some people wept, seeing just rules and work. "No," said Nehemiah. Following God only works when we live in "the joy of the Lord." Since Israel had been in exile in Babylon for a generation or two, Ezra and Nehemiah believed a public reading of God's law (possibly the book of Deuteronomy) would help get everybody "on the same page." But at first "all the people wept when they heard the words of the Instruction"—they seem to have heard only rules and condemnation. Have you ever felt, or known anyone who felt, that following God was cause for weeping? When Persia first let Israel's exiles return, it brought dizzying joy (cf. Psalm 126:1-3). But, apparently, many Israelites didn't connect that joy with faithfulness to God. So Nehemiah had to remind them: "Don't mourn or weep....This day is holy to our Lord. Don't be sad, because the joy from the Lord is your strength!" What has helped you to see following God not as hard work, but as a joyous privilege?

Tuesday, May 29 – Read Matthew 13:44-46. Jesus talked about his kingdom as a buried treasure someone found unexpectedly. He said if that happened, the person would rush, "full of joy," to do whatever it took to buy that piece of ground. Baseball announcer Harry Caray expressed joy in the setting of baseball. He usually began his broadcasts with, "Hello again, everybody. It's a bee-yooo-tiful day for baseball." Have you ever found a great buy at a garage or estate sale, or a truly beautiful flower, scene or adorable baby animal to photograph? When have you sensed a similar inner joy while studying your Bible, seeing God in a child's face, or finding the unforced rhythms of God's grace in your life? How can you stay alert to the joy of experiences like that? In these two brief parables, Jesus said that, as citizens of his kingdom, we get to have an experience like the treasure finders'. We receive new joy, new motivation and purpose in life, new values and focus. Is your experience of Jesus' kingdom more and more one of joy, or duty? Of being set free, or just more rules to follow? What value do you place on belonging to Jesus' kingdom?

Wednesday, May 30 – Read Matthew 18:1-3, 19:13-15. Catcher Roy Campanella observed, “To be good [at baseball,] you've gotta have a lot of little boy in you. When you see Willie Mays and Ted Williams jumping and hopping around the bases after hitting a home run...you realize they have to be little boys.” Jesus said his kingdom, perhaps even more than baseball, calls for childlike joy and simplicity. Pitcher and manager Bob Lemon once said, “Baseball was made for kids, and grown-ups only screw it up.” In Matthew 19, Jesus' disciples apparently behaved like that with children who came to Jesus. Have you ever known (or been) an adult who wanted to reserve Jesus for grown-ups, to keep childish laughter or fun at arm's length in church? How do you understand Jesus' meaning when he said, “If you don't turn your lives around and become like this little child, you will definitely not enter the kingdom of heaven”? What child-like qualities have helped you most to follow Jesus more faithfully? Since Scripture also called for maturity (e.g. Hebrews 5:13-14), in what ways is it worth growing beyond childishness?

Thursday, May 31 – Read Romans 14:10-18. Hall of Famer George Brett said, “I could have played another year, but I would have been playing for the money, and baseball deserves better than that.” Paul wrote to Christians in Rome who were dividing into judgmental factions over differences about just what a good Christian should and shouldn't eat. Paul said God's kingdom deserves better than that kind of critical, joyless “faith.” The kingdom is about “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Paul spoke to disagreements over relatively minor issues (that seemed major to those who felt strongly about them). How can remembering that “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” are the essence of your faith help you to “major in majors,” honoring your own convictions while respecting those of others in less vital areas? George Brett gave an example of what many people call “respecting the game.” How much more important it is to respect our faith, and our faith family! What attitudes and actions bring peace and build up other members of your church “team”? Which of those are practically second nature for you? In which do you want to grow stronger, with the Holy Spirit's help?

Friday, June 1 – Read John 16:16-22. Even people who love baseball can acknowledge downsides and challenges. “I really love baseball,” said announcer Vin Scully. “I love the challenge of describing things. The only thing I hate—and I know you have to be realistic—is the loneliness on the road.” Jesus' disciples found great joy in serving the risen Lord, but the road to it ran through the grief of the cross. In verse 18, John wrote that Jesus' teaching (that hardship would come, but wouldn't last forever) confused the disciples. What has been your experience of suffering—emotional, physical or both? When you have faced those times, have you felt any confusion about how your faith fits into that? Has having a connection with Jesus made a difference in your ability to persevere? Scholar N. T. Wright noted, “Giving birth is terrifying....a form of agony that mere men can only watch with awe. But most women giving birth go through it with eager expectation.... John wants us to grasp that with Jesus' death and resurrection, a new world—the new world—is indeed being born. This isn't just a matter of Jesus saying ‘there's trouble coming, but it will be all right afterwards’.” In what ways has the new world to which Jesus' death and resurrection gave birth changed your world for the better?

Saturday, June 2 – Read Hebrews 12:1-3. Sometimes we think we are racing toward Jesus, that we have to find him. But John Wesley taught that God's grace has been at work in our hearts before we ever begin to respond to God. As we focus on Jesus, we realize that he has been drawing us all along. Pitcher Jim Bouton wrote, reflectively, “You spend a good piece of your

life gripping a baseball, and in the end it turns out that it was the other way around all the time.” Baseball grips its players—and Jesus' love grips each one of us, and changes us for the better. Scholar Raymond Brown wrote, “The word used here (aphorōntes)...indicates the action of one who, aware of rival attractions, deliberately looks away from other things. This runner must keep his eyes ‘fixed on Jesus,’ not only at the start of the race, but constantly during the whole struggle.” Faced with a calendar that can easily overflow, how do you choose priorities and keep your life focused, rather than randomly overwhelmed (even with good things)? When have you sensed the gripping power of Jesus' self-giving love for you?