

WHAT'S YOUR TROPHY?

1 Kings 3: 5-12 Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

It's a dish. It is a little more than 18 inches in diameter. Made of sterling silver, around the rim appears the goddess Minerva, with symbols for the liberal arts: arithmetic, astrology, dialectic, geometry, grammar, music and rhetoric. There's absolutely nothing on the dish about tennis, which is strange given the fact that it's the trophy awarded to the Ladies Singles Champion at Wimbledon – the Venus Rosewater Dish. You may recall Marketa Vondrousova holding it high just two weeks ago. The dish has been awarded to the ladies' singles champ since 1886. The winners get to hold the dish, but they don't get to keep it. The original stays in the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum; the winner gets an 8-inch replica and a bunch of prize money – this year, \$2.9 million. Not a bad consolation prize. I think the Venus Rosewater Dish looks like something that should be propped up in your grandmother's china cabinet. But if you're a tennis player, the Dish is a precious treasure, the holy grail, the pearl of great value. Players from around the world push themselves to their physical and mental limits – training, practicing, focusing, competing – hoping to be able to play at Wimbledon, the most prestigious tennis tournament in the world. And all along the way, they are dreaming of the Venus Rosewater Dish.

Of course, this trophy is not unique. There is no lack of odd prizes that people pursue with passion and single-minded purpose. Consider the Borg-Warner Trophy, awarded to

the winner of the Indianapolis 500 since 1936. On it are the sculpted faces of each winner; perhaps more important, the cup's hollow body is able to hold 48 cans of beer, which is especially important to race fans in Wisconsin. Or consider the Green Jacket, given to the winner of the Masters Golf Tournament since 1949. Winners are thrilled to wear this coveted Green Jacket, even though it's really not the kind of jacket you'd wear in public – it is actually quite an ugly color. How about an Olive Wreath, placed on the heads of Boston Marathon winners since 1897? Each year these olive branches are cut from groves in Marathon, Greece, the scene of the battle from which the original marathoner, a man named Pheidippides, ran to announce the Athenian victory in 490 B.C.; he then immediately proceeded to drop over dead – which is exactly what I would do if I had to run a marathon. But perhaps the oddest prize is Floyd of Rosedale, the 98-pound statue of a pig that has been awarded to the winner of the annual Iowa-Minnesota college football game since 1935. The rivalry had grown increasingly ugly prior to 1935. The governor of Minnesota feared mayhem, so he tried to lighten the mood by betting a prize hog on the outcome of the game. The governor of Iowa went along. The game was played without controversy, Minnesota won, and the governor of Iowa personally delivered a pig from Rosedale Farms in Iowa to the Minnesota statehouse – naming him “Floyd,” after Floyd Olson, the governor of Minnesota. Well, the pig died the next year, and was buried in a field halfway between the two schools. A bronze statue was commissioned in the pig's likeness, and this prize is awarded each year to the winner of

the football game, as a symbol of sportsmanship. It's not quite the golden calf at Sinai, but still, it's kind of weird.

People put a lot of time, sweat, money and energy to get some strange prizes. But check out Matthew 13, and you discover another set of rather peculiar prizes that people pursue with passion and purpose, using every ounce of their heart, soul, mind and strength. The single unifying theme is that these treasures are all illustration of, or metaphors for, the Kingdom of God. *“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field,”* says Jesus, *“which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”* Jesus goes on to say, *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”* The Kingdom of Heaven is like the Venus Rosewater Dish, a treasure hidden in a field, an ugly Green Jacket, or a pearl of great value. But are we pursuing the Kingdom of God with the passion of a Jon Rahm or Tiger Woods, Marketa Vondrousova or Venus Williams? Where are our attitudes, determination, and desire? Where's our sense that we are on a mission as disciples of Jesus Christ?

Earthly prizes are fairly easy to identify, whether they be winning athletic championships or achieving sales goals at work. Perhaps the goal is losing weight and getting back into the smaller pair of jeans. Maybe the goal is gaining an advanced degree, and the addition of various initials after your name. But heavenly prizes? These are a bit more difficult to

visualize. Still, give it a try. Imagine yourself striving to fully live by the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount. Picture yourself digging into the parables of Jesus. What would it look like in your home to begin each day with the discipline of Daily Prayer and the reading of the Daily Lectionary? Or to truly treat your neighbor – yes, that often-irritating neighbor, or the Muslim neighbor, or the LGBTQ neighbor, or the neighbor of a different color or culture – as you would like to be treated? Or serving Jesus Christ by serving the hungry and homeless once a month at Feed My People or The Community Table? Each is a worthwhile goal, and each requires determination, desire, and a sense of mission. Each will challenge you, reward you, and turn you ever-so-slowly into a better person. The question is – do such efforts inspire our hearts like a smaller pair of jeans, or fire our passion like an ugly Green Jacket?

The stakes are high when you pick a prize and pursue it. Every choice we make in daily life is going to have consequences. *“Again,”* says Jesus, *“the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.”* So it will be at the end of time, says Jesus, when the angels of God separate the evil from the righteous. In other words, Jesus is saying that you have to pick your prize well. Think of the story of Solomon we heard earlier. The young boy is thrust into a very difficult situation, taking over for his father, the great King David. He didn’t know what he was doing! But when asked by God what he wanted, did he ask for riches or a variety of other earthly

prizes? No, he asked for wisdom, to care for the people of God. Have you ever ordered anything out of a catalog or one of those TV or Facebook ads, only to find when it was delivered to your door that the quality was poor, the price too high, and the product not what you expected? Jesus tells us that there are many, many things that we pursue in daily life that are not worth the price and sacrifice we pay for them. Yet, there are Kingdom goals that are worth any price and any sacrifice.

Some of humanity's greatest contributions have come from people who decided that no sacrifice was too large and no efforts too great to accomplish what they set out to do. Edward Gibbon spent 26 years writing The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Noah Webster worked diligently for 36 years to bring into print the first edition of his dictionary. Holy cow! What stamina and persistence! Now think about how much time and persistence we put into the Lord's work. The comparison can be kind embarrassing, can't it? And trust me, I am preaching just as much to myself as I am to any of you. Why is our service to Christ sometimes performed in a halfhearted manner? Why do we prepare more diligently for our responsibilities in the world than we do our responsibilities as members of the body of Christ?

Well, the good news is that we don't have to win any world championships to live a life that is pleasing to God. Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, that grows into "*the greatest of shrubs.*" And he says that the kingdom

“is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.” The point is that small acts can lead to great results. Small acts of love and faithfulness can transform the world around us, changing both ourselves and our communities for the better. Perhaps your first steps of renewed discipleship will be small ones; but as long as they are steps taken in the right direction and for the right purpose, they can lead you on an incredible journey. As I told our little ones – a dime is smaller than a nickel, but worth twice as much. Little things can bring about big things! How will you spend your dime?

Our youth just came back from working at the Rosebud Sioux Reservation on their mission trip two weeks ago. If you look at the work they did there within the larger scheme of world needs, was it really a big deal? Some people might say ‘no.’ But I think they did a lot. I think they planted mustard seeds. I think they added yeast to the flour. In acts pleasing to God and loving to their new neighbors, they gave witness, they enacted the vision of God’s Kingdom. They spent their dimes. So, what is your mission in the coming week? What prize are you working for?

In the end, the Venus Rosewater Dish is just a silver plate, an earthly prize. Floyd of Rosedale is just a bronze pig, no matter who wins the football game. But these awards are clear reminders of the importance of focus, sacrifice, passion and purpose. May each of us bring these same qualities into our lives as we daily pursue the greatest prize of all -

the Kingdom of God. May we spend our dimes so that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Rev Eric G Nielsen
St John's Lutheran Church – Eau Claire, WI
July 30, 2023