

Holy Hobby

By Mark Bergin

It's baseball season. And my childhood team has the best one-two pitching combination in the game. Felix Hernandez at the top, all 6 foot 3, 225 pounds of him, with a high 90s fastball and devastating curve, change, and slider. Get by him, and dominating southpaw Cliff Lee awaits in the rotation's two hole. A free agent acquisition from Philadelphia, Lee is among the most precise corner painters out there, always tickling the edges of the strike zone, seemingly never putting one out over the plate.

The bats are better, too, for my favorite nine, with more power from the outfield and proven veteran infielders where maddeningly inconsistent youngsters once stood. Give me Jack Wilson at short over Yuniesky Betancourt any day of the week – even better, every day of the week. Add in a solid bullpen and gold glove caliber players in center and right, and my Mariners could make a run at 90 wins – not bad for a team that lost 101 games two seasons ago.

No other sport can compare to the daily roller coaster of following baseball. Win. Loss. Win. Loss. Win, win. Loss, loss. With a new result almost every day, I'll be hooked all summer, combing over box scores to recreate the games in my mind from afar, tracking the standings with all the interest of a schoolboy on Christmas morning.

More than any other kind, baseball numbers were made to crunch. How does Griffey hit with runners in scoring position against left-handers during night games on artificial grass? What's the team's record in the first game of a home stand coming off a losing road trip with no travel day? Where does the team's bullpen rank in the league for walks plus hits over innings pitched? Chomp. Chomp. Chomp. What a pastime!

Pastime? Are we allowed to have those, we the called out ones, we the people of the Book, we the supposed redeemers of time? Should Christians, never mind a pastor, fritter away hours on something so frivolous as baseball?

For many, taking Christian faith seriously seems to mean letting go of the interests and hobbies that once delighted them. As a pastor, I watch this exchange play out routinely. The redeemed music junkie increasingly leaves the iPod to gather dust. The converted golfer forsakes his game. The believing classic car tinkerer abandons the garage.

The reason for all this is simple enough to understand. The value of past enjoyments simply lessens in light of the ultimate enjoyment, the king himself. Why would any true believer squander time on hobbies when the maker of all things beckons spend time with him?

Trouble is, that kind of thinking shrinks God into some sort of niche potentate, presiding over only spiritual affairs, never sullyng his hands with so-called secular diversions. In fact, no such dichotomy exists. God made it all, rules it all, and gave it to us to enjoy it all. Baseball,

music, classic cars, all from his hand, all meant to delight. Far from giving up on hobbies, the true believer is liberated to revel in them all the more, as gifts from a beneficent father, emblems of divine love. We are freed from placing undue expectations on them. They are not ultimate or meant, in and of themselves, to provide meaning or security or purpose. They are simply enjoyable.

So enjoy. May our Christian communities be ones of diverse interests and rich culture, places where the whole of creation is celebrated for all its color, flavor, soul, and splendor. Hit a golf ball today for Jesus. Go fly-fishing. Hike the foothills. Knit a quilt. Play an instrument. Learn to salsa. Paint. Then concoct a marinade, grill some steaks, decant your wine, and flip on the radio to catch a ball game. Hernandez is on the mound, and throwing heat.

Those are my thoughts, and I'm Mark Bergin.