

*Lay Your Trophies Down*

1974 was a big year for me. I was in ninth grade, so, while technically a freshman in high school, I was actually in the oldest class in my junior high school. I happened to be in a youth duckpin bowling league that year. Duckpin bowling is a unique Baltimore tradition. It's like regular bowling, except the balls are lighter and smaller, and the pins are shorter and fatter. In duckpin bowling the scores are much lower than in regular bowling. Bowl better than a 100 in duckpins and you've had a good game. That year I bowled the highest single game score in my league, a 169. That would be like a 250 in regular bowling. I won a nice trophy for that.

Also that year I was invited to participate in the South Baltimore Optimist Club's annual Oratorical Contest and my speech won. I didn't do so well at the state finals, but for my victory at the local level, I got a huge trophy. (It's a shame I didn't find a way to include public speaking in my life's work.) I was so proud of those trophies, I thought I'd display them all my life. But after a few years they started to fall apart and they just weren't that important to me as I grew up. At some point I threw those trophies away.

Sometimes I think about those trophies when I hear the song *The Old Rugged Cross*, which we don't sing often here (although I occasionally pull it out on Good Friday). The refrain of *The Old Rugged Cross* goes, "So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown." That powerfully reminds us that, yes, someday we all we have to throw our

trophies away. One day all the diplomas on our walls, all the achievements on our resumes, all the status symbols we collect, we are going to have to give up and that hurts. If that's all our life has been about, collecting trophies, having them rust and decay will be very upsetting to us.

That might be why the disciples were so upset when Jesus talked about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and how one stone would not be left upon another. I imagine Jesus' disciples visiting Jerusalem and being like country bumpkins visiting the big city for the first time. The way someone who had never seen a skyscraper might react to seeing the USX Building for the first time might be how the disciples reacted when they first saw the temple, "Wow! It's so beautiful and so big!" In many ways the temple was like a national trophy, a monument to the Jewish king and his people, celebrating who they were and what they had accomplished – which really wasn't very much, but they were proud anyway.

For Jesus to talk about the temple being destroyed was an insult to their national pride and a challenge to their religious beliefs. The temple was the very center of their religious life; it symbolized God's presence among them. The temple had been destroyed before, and they had sworn to never let it happen again. Little did they know that Jesus was absolutely right with his prediction. Just a few short decades after his death and Resurrection the temple would be destroyed and it has yet to be rebuilt to this day.

When Jesus was speaking about the Temple being destroyed, it appears he was also speaking about his return at the End of Time as we know it.

Christ's return to earth has been called by various names over the years:

Judgment Day, Doom's Day, the Second Coming, the Parousia, the Second Advent, the Apocalypse, and the Eschaton, among others. Whatever you call it, the End of History has been on people's minds all throughout history. In our own lifetimes we have already survived several predicted apocalypses. Anyone remember Y2K? And in case you haven't heard it yet, there is a spate of New Age prophecies pointing to the year 2012 as the End of Time. You'll be seeing that in various books and movies that are coming out. We've seen this eschatological fervor before.

As our anxieties go up, so do our hopes, or our fears, that we are living in the Last Days. Biblical prophecy does seem rather consistent in predicting unprecedented troubles in the world prior to the End: natural disasters and international conflicts and such. When we think about the international situation with wars and rumors of wars, and the domestic situation with greater than 10% unemployment, and the continuing decline in morals and values in the Western World, and apparent changes in the environment, it's easy to imagine that we are living in the final generation.

As the hands on the Big Clock move toward midnight, we might be filled with fear as we contemplate the tribulations that will proceed the End, or perhaps we are filled with joy and hope as we eagerly anticipate Jesus coming again to free us from the pain and injustice of this life. How hopeful or fearful we are might depend on how ready we are to lay down our trophies at his feet when Jesus comes for us.

Everyday we are exactly one day closer to Jesus' return. We don't know how far away in time or near that Return might be. As our anxieties arise so

do the number of predictions pinning down a moment for Christ's Second Advent. Yet, Holy Scripture is abundantly clear that no one knows the timetable for Jesus' return except God the Father. Still, human beings have created an incredibly large industry trading on people's hopes and fears regarding prophecies of the End Time.

Whatever else you may have heard about Jesus' return, be sure of one thing: Jesus' return, the apocalypse, is not determined by the Mayan calendar, or Nostradamus, or any human being. Only God completes the world in His time, which is the right time, and in His way, which is the right way. We should consider any delay in Christ's return as an act of mercy, as God graciously extends the time so that more and more people might be brought to salvation. Jesus delaying his coming is an act of mercy on his part.

For some of us, maybe all of us, our earthly life will end before Jesus comes again. We don't talk about our own personal demise very much, but our deaths as individuals are always a clear and present reality. What Christ's return to earth is writ large, so are our deaths writ on a personal level. Just as at the Eschaton there will be monuments and trophies like the Temple destroyed, we must ask ourselves are we ready individually to lay down our personal trophies and go to be with Jesus? If we are not ready, perhaps it is because we are too attached to our earthly treasures and trophies. Perhaps we are too attached to our possessions.

Estate sales always graphically illustrate for me the fleeting, temporary nature of our possessions. At an estate sale you find all the trophies and treasures someone took a lifetime to collect, and there they are for sale for

pennies on the dollar. That image might help us put in perspective our attachment to the things of this world and the concern we should have for the life beyond this world. It may be near blasphemy to say it in Pittsburgh, but there might be more to life than the Stanley Cup or the Lombardi Trophy. There might be more to life than the notches we cut on our guns and the scalps we collect settling personal vendettas. I know there is more to life than cars and homes and bank accounts and such. All those things can disappear in the blink of an eye. And what then is left for us? To whom shall we go? Where is our hope and salvation?

When we lay down our trophies, or when they are stripped from us, then Christ is there. Then we see the beauty of the cross: the meanest, barest of symbols, a symbol of poverty and pain, a symbol transformed by Christ's grace into the richest, most glorious symbol. The cross is where our broken down trophies get exchanged for an everlasting crown of gold.

We are coming into the season of conspicuous consumption and consumerism as we prepare for capitalist Christmas. It's less than two weeks to "Black Friday." It's easy to let what gifts we give and receive be trophies to our earning ability and our fragile sense of self-worth. Lay those trophies down. We can not only survive on less, we can be happy with less. Don't let your possessions be a burden to you. Break free from the need to own and flaunt. Look for the presence of Christ in your life and you will find him there, un-obscured by stuff. Cling to him in faith and receive his blessing. That's all you really need to make it though the night of doubt and sorrow to the morning of everlasting joy. Amen.