

There is an old story involving Yogi Berra, the well-known catcher for the New York Yankees – and Hank Aaron, who at the time was the chief power hitter for the Milwaukee Braves.

It was 1957, and the teams were playing in the World Series, and as usual, Yogi was keeping up ceaseless chatter behind the plate – intending to pep up his teammates on the one hand – and to distract the batters on the other.

As Aaron came to the plate, Yogi tried to distract him by saying: “Henry, you’re holding your bat wrong. You’re supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark.”

Aaron said nothing – and when the first pitch came --he hit it into the left-field bleachers.

After rounding the bases and tagging up at home – he made sure to tell Yogi Berra: “I came here to hit baseballs – not to read!”

Henry Aaron remained a power hitter, throughout his career -- because he did not let anything distract him from his purpose – which, of course, was hitting baseballs – not reading.

Distractions: those things that prevent us from giving our full attention to something.

We all have to deal with distractions. We get distracted at work, distracted when we drive, distracted when we are trying to carry on a conversation ---- distracted when we pray.

Sometimes a preacher even gets distracted when they are trying to preach. . . as the Baptist minister Tom Rainier tells –

“one time in the middle of my sermon, a bat started flying low over the congregation. Many people began screaming, and all were ducking to avoid it hitting them.

Finally some men capture the poor critter. They quietly prayed over it – and then released it ---- toward the Methodist Church. . .

Writer Tom Kite says, “you can always find a good distraction –if you’re looking for one.”

Just as Jesus knew human nature so well that he knew FEAR could keep us from claiming and then proclaiming the freedom that is ours in the pursuit of the kingdom of heaven –

Jesus also knew that we can so easily get distracted from our pursuit of the kingdom once we commit ourselves to it.

That’s why he tells his followers today to be single-minded in our pursuit of the kingdom: he doesn’t want anything to distract us.

Jesus clearly states that he is to be above everyone and everything else in our lives --- even our family. So he is asking for a pretty radical single-minded-ness!

But notice Jesus isn’t saying that we ignore others – he is just trying to transform those encounters – to raise them to a different level --- because he also says whoever receives his followers – receives him.

With that Jesus is reminding us that our relationship to him is expressed in our relationships with each other: we relate to and reach out to others – are kind, merciful, and compassionate ---

NOT because those we encounter are family or friends --- but because they are the presence of Christ.

- In giving and receiving from other people -- we make evident that Jesus is the center and focus of our lives.

- In giving and receiving from other people -- we lose our lives for the sake of others.

-In giving and receiving from other people --- we find fullness of life – Jesus himself!

By staying focused like a laser-beam on the kingdom of heaven --- in not being distracted by anyone or anything else --- we proclaim the values of the kingdom by our words and actions. –

Recognizing in the faces not just of family and friends – but in everyone we meet – the face of Jesus.

In 20 weeks – on the Feast of Christ the King – Jesus is going to give us the answers to the final exam that we will be given when we come face to face with God at the end of our lives:

“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you drink?

When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?

When did we see you ill or in prison and visit you?

And the Lord will say in reply: Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least of mine – you did it for me.”

That’s our purpose – not hitting baseballs – but reaching out to the least of this world – because we recognize in them – the face of Christ.

So let’s remain focused – and not be distracted – and with the grace of God, accomplish our purpose.