Sunday, August 3, 1986
DEALING WITH BROKEN DREAMS
Romans 5:1-5; John 6:24-27

He is nine years old; his name is Brett. For three years he has been asking his parents if he could play in the Little League. This summer they said yes. He is small for his age, with curly brown hair and bright blue eyes. The girls think he is cute, but he tells his mother he doesn't care about that. When his mother and father said he could play in the league this year, he just about exploded with joy. In other summers, he watched baseball on television; this year he was going to play.

His parents took him to the first practice, and they could see it in his eyes: he idolized the man who was coaching the team. The other boys had played in previous years — Little Leaguers start young — but Brett didn't care. At last, he was going to be one of them.

After the first few games, he would come home from practice, and his parents could sense that something was wrong. It is best not to pry into the secrets of little boys, but they were concerned. So one night after dinner, they walked over to see his team play.

They watched as the game started, and their son did not get in. There were 15 boys on the team, some of them very good. But most of them were bigger than Brett and stronger; they were the ones who played the whole game. The coach let Brett in for one inning; when the inning was over, the coach took him out.

At home, after the game, Brett's parents asked him what had been bothering him. He said that at the beginning of the season, the coach had said that every boy could play, but for Brett, that meant only the bare minimum — one inning each game. The coach was afraid that if Brett stayed in too long, the team might lose the game. As it was, he was put in right field, the place that boys who are not good enough are traditionally sent.

His mother started going to every game. She would watch as Brett stood on the sidelines, his eyes alive, everything in his face almost begging to get in. And every game, she watched as the coach reluctantly let her son play for one inning, and not a moment more.

At home, Brett would put his uniform on four hours before he was supposed to go to the game. He would walk around the house in it, look at himself in the mirror, check the clock every few minutes; the games were supposed to start at six p.m., but Brett would get there at quarter to five just to be sure. Every game was going to be the one when he would really get to play.

And his mother kept going to the games. Even from a distance, she would see those eyes lighting up every time it seemed he might get to go in. She would see those eyes, and then she would see the coach not even knowing her son was there. The coach looked at the more skillful boys out on the field, and her son looked at the coach; it made her sick to see it.

One day, after the game, when no one was looking, she approached the coach. She asked him why. "I have to keep the best ones in," the coach said. "We're in a league, you know. We're trying to win. I have five boys on the team who only play one inning. Your son is one of them."

At home, Brett would ask his father to practice with him in the driveway. The father is not an athletically inclined man, but of course, he said, “Yes.” Brett said he was “working on his arm,” as if that would help change things at the next game.

And every game, he would get into his uniform early; every game, he would be the first one at the field.

His mother watched one game where he got in. The boys who got to play regularly — the skillful ones — horsed around between innings, did tricks on their bikes, and made jokes with each other. Brett, though, only looked at the game. He never even got a drink of water. This night when he got to bat, he kept in mind the coach’s admonitions about not backing away from the ball. The pitch came in hard and close, and it hit him hard enough to make him cry. When the inning was over, he stood expectantly on the sidelines, hoping to be back in. But the coach only called to the regulars: “Double the limit at the Dairy Queen if you win.” Brett did not play again that night.

One evening it happened; for some reason, a lot of the boys had other things to do, and there were only nine present when it was time for the game to begin. His mother was there again, and she saw the coach tell Brett that he was going to get to start the game in right field. She saw him begin to smile, and then suppress it; he ran out to right field, part of the starting team.

In the middle of the first inning, one of the regulars rode up on his bike. The coach was clearly glad to see him. When Brett trotted off the field, he saw that the other boy had arrived. The coach took Brett out. His evening was over.

The season is almost finished now. Brett does not put his uniform on four hours early anymore; he does not watch the clock. He still goes to the games, but he has learned his lesson. He doesn’t talk about baseball around the house.

His parents are trying to find a moral in all of this. They know it happens to many boys in thousands of cities around the country every summer. His parents tell themselves that maybe it will turn out to be a good experience; maybe it will teach their son something about life, about dreams, and about putting too much faith in those dreams.

That’s what they tell themselves, but they don’t believe it. All they know is that their son, at the age of nine, has been shown that he isn’t good enough. We all learn that sometime in this life; some find it out earlier than others. The other night, Brett told his parents that he wasn’t going to play baseball next summer. The eyes weren’t as bright; that’s what hurt his parents the most. The eyes weren’t as bright. (This story is told by Bob Greene in his book, “American Beat.")

Broken dreams. We all have them. For all of us, they begin early in life when we are children. And they do not end when we grow up.

Those of us who are older, as we watch the young grow up as we did with their ambitions and plans and dreams, we wonder what they will do when they face the inescapable experience of having some of their dreams unfulfilled — broken.

Broken dreams are a problem that affects us at every age and in every economic bracket. We can be well off financially and still have broken dreams. They occur in our lives no matter how young or old we are. I believe that a lot of what we today call the mid-life crisis is actually the

question of how to deal with unrealized or broken dreams. A man or woman comes to the realization that he or she is not going to fulfill the dream in the way it was envisioned.

The only way not to have any broken dreams, no disappointments, is to not have any dreams at all. Never risk anything, and you will never fail, nor, of course, will you succeed. The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing.

What then does our Christian faith have to say to us about dealing with our broken dreams?

First of all, as I have already briefly mentioned, remember that having some broken dreams is going to be a part of every human being's life unless we hide or never try anything or never have any dreams at all. Our Christian faith does not promise us a life free of disappointment. Therefore, do not be surprised when broken dreams occur. They come to all of us, young and old, rich and poor. Jesus experienced a number of severe disappointments in his short life. His closest friends deserted him in his hour of need.
As human beings, God has created us with the capacity to dream and with the wish to build a better life for the world and for ourselves and our loved ones. To be able to dream is built into our basic nature. To deny dreams is to deny our basic nature as creatures of God. However, the fact is that our reach will sometimes exceed our grasp. When we have dreams, the fact is that all of them will not be fulfilled according to our desires.

Again, imagine a life devoid of expectations, dreams, wishes, and hopes, and therefore little disappointment. It would be a dull, bland, boring existence.

So the fact that some of our dreams are never fulfilled should not keep us from having new dreams. My hunch is that little boys and girls like Brett will dream again and some of these dreams will be fulfilled in ways they had not expected.

Sam Keen wrote: "Life is not a bowl of Librium. . .and a good part of the secret of happiness lies in learning to suffer with dignity. Loneliness, loss, disappointment, failure, disease, boredom are inevitable. The price of trying to avoid the unavoidable is illusion, or neurosis. Even if you jog, eat health foods, meditate, and go to confession regularly, you will sometimes fall sick."

Secondly, our Christian faith reminds us that none of our dreams, no matter how intense or how important they seem to us at the time, are immortal.
Too often we clothe our plans, our ideas, our projects, our dreams with immortality. We come to believe that if they are not accomplished and on the schedule, we have set for them, all is lost. It's natural for us to have dreams and goals and schedules, but if they do not all come to fruition, it does not mean that our life is over or wasted. Too often we give eternal value to the things we own, the dreams we have, and the successes or failures we collect. All of these will pass away.

Few of our dreams involve matters of life or death. And none are irreplaceable. I hope that nine-year-old Brett learned that it was all right to dream of being a star in the Little League, but at the same time, his life is not over if it doesn't happen that way.

Some of us can become over-invested in a particular dream. As a result, we hold on to it long after it is broken. Most of the time when it is broken and irreplaceable, it is better to leave it behind. A broken dream is not the end of the world. It is only a broken dream.

Thirdly, our Christian faith reminds us that the ultimate way of handling any broken dream is to trust in God and in God's ultimate love and purpose.
Jesus put it this way in our scripture reading for this morning: "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life." Jesus doesn't want us to experience the ultimate broken dreams — to work and work and work and work to fulfill our dreams, to make it our god, and find in the end it's all for nothing.

Jesus told a story about a rich man who had more than he needed and he thought to himself, "What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said, I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods, and I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool, this night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'" In the end, it was all for nothing.

"Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life." And there is only one food that does not perish — ever. It is the love of God present in Jesus and still living among us. The Apostle Paul put it this way in his letter to the church in Rome: "Hope in God does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."

Knowing this, broken dreams will make us unhappy and we will suffer because of them, but only for a time. Because we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God. In fact, broken dreams can even help us. They remind us of our own limits. They remind us that only God and God's love can ultimately satisfy us. Broken dreams can also shake us out of our preoccupation with ourselves and can lead us to reach out to others and to God. Amen.