HOMILY FOR THE 24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – Cycle B
September 13, 2015

When I was a junior in high school we got a new baseball coach. Those of us who played baseball were pretty excited about this because the new coach had been a good ballplayer himself. He was a very spirited man with a good sense of humor. I had encountered this man in many different contexts as a teacher, as an official at some of my sporting events. And I had even watched him play ball. I thought he was a great man. And he was.

Well at his first meeting with those of us who wanted to play baseball, he let us know how things were going to be if we were going to be on his team. The first couple of weeks we were going to do conditioning. He promised he was going to run us ragged. As you might guess, some of us were a bit unnerved by this. We just wanted to play baseball. But he was the coach. And at our first practice, he did exactly what he said he was going to do. We ran sprints. We stretched. We did strengthening exercises. And then we ran some more. We never touched a bat, ball, or glove.

Now by the end of practice it was pretty obvious that some of the guys weren’t too thrilled by the ordeal they had just been put through. But the coach seemed unfazed by this. He gathered us around him and said that this is what we had to do if we were going to get out on that field and play the game as he believed it should be played. He was going to make us the best ball players we could be. But to do this, we were going to have to do what he told us to do and not just give some half-hearted effort.

Well, some guys decided to drop out. But those of us who really wanted to get out on that field and play ball chose to stick with him. I mean, he was the coach. There was no alternative if we wanted to play ball. Besides, he knew more about baseball than we did. And we really did believe that he could get us to where we wanted to be as individuals and as a team. So we did everything he told us to do with as much gusto as we could muster.

I know that many of us have had similar experiences with athletics, professions, or any other endeavor we really cared about. Our acknowledged leaders were demanding. But we knew they were masters at what we were endeavoring to do. We knew that they could help us to be best we could be. So we set aside our own desires and preconceptions and did what they told us to do. We didn’t always like it. It was really tough at times. And sometimes we had to remind ourselves why we were with that particular coach, teacher, or leader. But being thus reminded, we stuck with them because we believed that they could get us to where we wanted to go.

I think that this is why Jesus asked his disciples “Who do you say I am?” before he went on to tell them what they’d be going through. For to say he was the Christ was to acknowledge that he was the one who could get them to where they wanted to go. He was the one who could bring them into that kingdom where life is full, rich, and eternal, that kingdom where life was as they dreamed it could be and more.

It is because Peter said, “You are the Christ,” that we can understand Jesus’ response to him when he tried to tell Jesus what he could and couldn’t do. “Get behind me Satan!” Jesus said. In other words, Peter’s response did not reflect a belief that the best thing he could do was to follow Jesus. Rather, it was the kind of response made by someone who didn’t want to be a disciple. That’s what Satan does. He refuses to acknowledge God as his master and to place himself under God’s direction.

So Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me.” For that’s what a disciple does. To be a disciple of Christ means to give up one’s own immediate desires and preconceptions for the sake of following him. In other words, if Peter really believed that Jesus was the Christ -- the one who could take him where he wanted to go -- then it wasn’t enough just to say it and then do whatever he thought best. Rather, to
acknowledge Jesus as the Christ meant that Peter had to do what Jesus said. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

And this is why James said in our second reading that we can’t be saved by faith alone, that is, by faith without works. He said it because Jesus is the Christ and faith without works is not anything like what Jesus said and did. Jesus was always doing good things for others and he told his disciples to do the same. So what James is saying in a nutshell is that if we really want to come to the eternal life of God’s kingdom, then the way to do it is to give ourselves over to following the Christ who will get us there. In a sense, he is just echoing Jesus here: Whoever his life for my sake, will save it.

Now I realize that this giving our lives over to following Jesus may seem a bit strange to us at first, it may seem like more than we bargained for. We live in a culture that encourages us to get what we want when we want it – with the promise that this is the way to happiness, to fullness of life. But as our coach taught our ball team and as Jesus taught his disciples – that’s not really the way it works – at least when it comes to the things that really matter most.

It is the constant witness of those who have given their lives over to following Jesus is that the more we give ourselves to it, the better it gets. It doesn’t deprive us of life. Rather, it leads to life at its best and most joyful. And not just down the road somewhere, but even now. For when we follow Jesus in the way of self-giving love – we actually begin to share in the life of the kingdom. We actually begin to share in that life where everything is as God intends it to be, in that life where we will find our complete fulfillment as the children of God.

And this will bring us joy. And experiencing this joy we will find ourselves following Jesus more and more faithfully, even through those places where life is difficult or painful, because we know that he is leading us to something so good that it is worth the struggle. And we know this, we will find joy.

It’s kind of like this. A few weeks ago we were having a little family gathering at our house. At one point our granddaughter wanted to do something that wasn’t on the list of approved activities for the day. Well, as you might guess, when she was told she couldn’t do it, she wasn’t a happy camper. Who would be?

So I took her outside and we leaned back together in a hammock. I looked up and said, “Is that an elephant up there in that tree?” Of course, this took her by surprise. But after a moment’s thought she said, “Yes it is.” Then, realizing that things were moving in a much more positive direction, I went on to name every animal I could think of, asking her if it was up in a tree. Well, before long, my granddaughter was naming animals too. And somewhere in the midst of all this, her sadness turned to joy. A few hours later, when we went out to the hammock again, she was the one who said, “Is that an elephant up there in that tree?” And again there was joy.

Now I realize that this may seem like a silly example when we are speaking of something as serious as taking up the life of a disciple of Christ. But in a sense the process is the same. We follow what Jesus says and do what Jesus does, and we find it brings us joy.

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