

25th Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Definition of Greatness”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Are any of you into fantasy football? I never was into this until just a couple years ago. My brother started a league for family members and I decided to join because it sounded like a good way to have fun and fellowship. And it has been really entertaining; however, since most of the games are on Sunday, I have been guilty of finding myself in between masses looking at my smart phone checking up on my players. For those who don't know how fantasy football works, everyone in the league participates in a draft before the start of the season (an excellent opportunity for a barbeque, by the way). In our league, the draft order is assigned randomly one hour before the draft. This requires a bit of homework going in because you don't have a lot of time to make your pick and so it is good idea to be familiar with the athletes and their teams. When it was time for my draft picks, there was only one question on my mind as I discerned my picks and the question was, “Of those available to me, who is the greatest?” What I meant by that was, which athlete will help my team score the most points each week? After the draft, however, you get to know your players a little bit better since you will be cheering them on. And what I discovered is, most of the players I draft are actually pretty good people on and off the field. What I also discovered is, sometimes there is a player I end up drafting who doesn't seem to be a very nice person at all. As a result, I end up feeling a little guilty cheering for them when they play. Not enough to trade them, mind you. It is just a game. Nevertheless, it was a good reminder for me to consider when asking the question, “who is the greatest”, what do I mean by that?

There are so many people that we see in popular culture that are routinely described as being great at what they do, athletes, celebrities, artists, political leaders, religious leaders, the list goes on. What is the definition of greatness? I remember in high school many years back that, during one of the years, there was a very slim difference in GPA from the person who became valedictorian and one of the salutatorians. I think it was a single A minus. And although both the valedictorian and the salutatorian were really good people, the salutatorian was a person who just did a lot more to make the school a special place. It made some of us ask the question what makes someone great?

And Jesus asked his disciples, what were you arguing about on the way?” But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way which one of them was the greatest. And, at the end of the day, it is all very silly. And yet it happens every day, sometimes at work, at school, or at home. Perhaps not always directly, usually indirectly, perhaps passive aggressively, we can even get into the habit of telling ourselves, “I am better at my job than that goof ball. I am a better student than that loser. I am a better son or daughter than my sibling. I am a better parent than my spouse.” “Huskies are clearly better than Cougars”. Politicians never play these games right? “I am a better person than my opponent”. I love St. James' comment in our second reading, it is a helpful spiritual reminder, “Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice.” This is a profound insight.

And so, what is Jesus' definition of greatness? Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to be first, they shall be the last of all and the servant of all." Let's hear it again. "If anyone wishes to be first, they shall be the last of all and the servant of all". As I pray about wider Church issues these days, I think we would be so well served if we went back to that definition of greatness, to be the last of all and the servant of all. This is good medicine for us as individuals as well. How much better would life be for us and for our relationships if we all realized that our lives are not about "me", but about Jesus Christ who is the way, the truth and the life?

Of course, Jesus taught by example, didn't he? He came to serve not to be served. He came to heal our infirmities, even die for our sins. During the last supper, the master knelt to wash his disciples feet commanding them to do likewise with those they meet. This image is so important to us at Saint Teresa of Calcutta that we have this image right in front on our altar. When you think about Mother Teresa, that is what she did. She washed people's feet following the Lord's example, making other people more important than herself. Jesus offers his very self as food in the Eucharist, died in our place on the cross, and rose again so that we too may have everlasting life.

My friends, do you know a sure fire way to make everyone hate you? Make yourself more important than others. Who wants to be around people like that, raise your hand? Do you want the surest way to have a lot of friends and people who love you? Make other people more important than yourself. Celebrate other people's successes rather than your own. Be interested in other people's lives rather than your own. Make other people's needs more important than your own. That is how a person becomes great in the eyes of God and you will have many friendships as a result. There is a lot of wisdom in Jesus' words today, "If anyone wishes to be first, they shall be the last of all and the servant of all". Jesus led by example by placing us as more important than himself. This is why the greatest of us is the one who does the same.