

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Enthusiasm, Intensity, and Discipleship”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Like many of you, I have enjoyed watching pre-season football. It is an opportunity to watch the next generation of football players chase their dreams of becoming professional athletes. This is not an easy thing to accomplish as we all know. One player in particular got a lot of attention last week whose story fits well with our readings this weekend, Damon Sheehy-Guiseppi of the Cleveland Browns. His story is interesting in that, although he did not have an invitation to attend tryouts, he talked his way on to the field that day. And, he impressed the Cleveland scouts so much at the tryouts, he got welcomed back for an actual practice with the team which was scheduled the next week. The trouble was, he didn't have enough money for a hotel room so he spent the days leading up to that practice at a neighborhood gym and spent the night sleeping on the grass outside that gym. Well, that was his routine every day until practice day arrived and he impressed the coaches so much that day to earn a spot at the first preseason game as a Cleveland Brown. And wouldn't you know it, during that pre-season game, Sheehy returned a kick over eighty yards for a touchdown. When that happened, the whole sideline for the Browns ran to the end zone to pig pile on Sheehy in celebration because they all knew his story. He literally went from an experience of homelessness to playing for the NFL. How's that for the American dream? It is truly remarkable.

Damon Sheehy-Guiseppi got me thinking about what motivates us to do what we do. Not all of us can play for the NFL but we all have goals that we strive for. What motivates us? How intense are we with regard to attaining our goals? What are we willing to sacrifice to make them? The Gospel reading begins with Jesus' remarkable exclamation, “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!” Like any serious athlete, Jesus has a goal to accomplish and he is serious about accomplishing that goal. The intensity Jesus is demonstrating here reminds me of the kind of intensity you can see on the face of an athlete right before a game begins. Jesus is the Son of God who has been sent by the Father to win for us the opportunity for everlasting life through his passion, death and resurrection. And this is no small endeavor, and so in today's Gospel, we are given a glimpse into Jesus' seriousness and enthusiasm as he gets ready for the salvific mission he has been preparing his whole life on earth for. He is ready to go, he is in position, and he is ready to accomplish what he has set out to do no matter how much suffering he was going to endure.

Perhaps this gives us an opportunity to reflect on the moments in our lives when we felt that same kind of intensity about accomplishing something. It could have been a sport that we competed heavily in during our younger days. It could have been a business deal of a lifetime that you have worked on for months or years finally coming to a close. Perhaps it was the intensity that grips the soul prior to finally gaining the courage to propose to your future spouse. There are many moments in our lives that we all have felt the intensity of the moment, where there was no small degree of anguish until we have completed our mission.

And this brings us to the second part of our Gospel reading that can be a little disturbing to us. Jesus says, “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three...” Why does Jesus say this? There are a couple reasons I think and the first one has to do with the fact that Christianity was illegal in the first several centuries. It was a capital offence to be a Christian in the Roman Empire because the Emperor claimed divinity for himself and he didn’t like the competition. In those days, telling a family member that you were now a Christian would have put the whole family in danger.

Meanwhile, as much as we would like to believe this kind of thing only happened long ago, there are still areas of the world where this kind of persecution still happens today as we all know. There are still places today where a kid might come home from college and share with a parent that he or she is a Christian now and the parents might respond with panic, “are you nuts...you have just put us all in danger”. And this still happens today. Think of the intensity of the faith of Christians in places like Syria or Northern Africa, places where it is dangerous to be a Christian, and we can ask ourselves, “What is my faith made of”? We all have the goal in life to be a good Christian, of loving God and our neighbor. How intense and enthusiastic are we of achieving that goal to the best of our ability?

Perhaps the author of Hebrews in our Second Reading gives us good advice on how to look at this spiritual challenge. He says, “let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.” The author mentions that the context here for this early Christian community is what he called the cloud of witnesses that surround them. The word witness in Greek is the word we have for “martyr”. It was the serious witness and enthusiasm of so many in their community that preceded them that kept them all in the race with their eyes fixed on Christ.

Back to our Gospel reading now, I think that there is a second reason that Jesus may have made this comment about family members divided against family members. I think Jesus also had the foresight to see this kind of thing happening in any household any time say perhaps a child might simply refuse to go to church with their parents. Sometimes this seems to be in the job description of a young person to test their boundaries, however, this kind of thing can be a source of division in the family. Parents work hard at passing on the faith to their children and sometimes it happens that children turn away from the faith. This can be a cause of a great deal of pain and anguish in the hearts of parents. In all honesty, this can sometimes be unavoidable, despite a parent's best effort, as we all know. On the other hand, I wonder if children really knew their parents' personal story of why Jesus is important to them at a heart level rather than a head level, if they would have been so blithe to cast aside the faith.

I mention this because I really think we Catholics sometimes do not do a good enough job of telling our story, our personal story of why Jesus is important to us, how a relationship with Jesus helps to guide us through life. Some of us do this very well with the intensity and enthusiasm we see in the Gospel, however, many of us can be lukewarm and mediocre when it comes to sharing our faith journey with others, even those we love the most. When we are asked about our personal story of what our relationship with Jesus looks like, do we rise to the challenge and share from the heart with sincerity and seriousness or do find ourselves not caring as much as we should? It is a question for us to consider sometimes.

Of course, this level of contemplation and faith sharing requires a lot of work, with no short supply of enthusiasm and even intensity. Perhaps, Gospel readings like we have this weekend might challenge us to feel a little bit of the kind of seriousness and hard work a professional athlete goes through each day to accomplish their goals. Maybe this is the kind of enthusiasm and seriousness we need to apply to any of our life goals that allude us, particularly when it comes to practicing our faith and sharing our faith with others. The difference is, of course, the work we put into our spiritual lives and into faith sharing can have the real outcome of influencing the eternal destinies of the people closest to us by introducing them to Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life.

Or, as St. Paul says in 1st Corinthians in a passage very similar to our second reading, he says, "Do you not know that the runners in a stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so to win! Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one", through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.