14th Sunday of Ordinary Time  
Cycle A, 7.9.17  
Zechariah 9:9-10/Romans 8:9,11-13/  
Matthew 11:25-30

LIFTED BY LOVE…  
COMFORTED BY COMPASSION

What are you doing to “beat the heat” these days? Are you staying indoors in air-conditioned comfort watching the “Tour de France”? Competition is tough and the stakes are high, especially for these “larger-than-life” athletic heroes. One world cycling champion, Peter Sagan, was eliminated a few days ago after being disqualified for elbowing a competitor -- Mark Cavendish -- to the ground. Cavendish had to abandon the race because of a broken shoulder. Sagan’s appeal to be allowed back into the competition was denied by the official Arbitration Board. The elimination of the two competitors obviously opened the field for others, but made for an unfortunate and untimely end of the race for Sagan and Cavendish.

Fierce athletic competition ended quite differently last month in this summer’s tennis competition. It was one of the most moving scenes in recent French Open memory. Nicolas Almagro of Spain and Juan Martin del Potro of Argentina were facing off in a second-round match at the June tournament in Paris. An hour-and-a-half into their deadlocked match, Almagro hunched over, hands on his knees, in tears. A recurring knee injury had worsened as the match went on. He dropped his racket in resignation and covered his face with both hands; he fell back on the red clay, his chest heaving as he cried. The match was over - and maybe Almagro's career.

Seeing his opponent in pain, del Potro swung one leg over the net and headed toward Almagro. The two have known each other since they were teenagers competing in the junior ranks. As medical personnel ran onto the court, del Potro crouched beside Almagro to comfort him. He got a bottle of water, opened it for Almagro, and helped him to his feet. Del Potro embraced the disconsolate Almagro; he then helped him over to their chairs, plopped down next to him, tousled his hair as he tried to console him.

Del Potro understood immediately what Almagro was going through: the winner of 2009 U.S. Open has struggled with injuries throughout his career, as well. He said he tried to lift Almagro's spirit by mentioning positive things in his life, to put his continued injury frustrations in tennis in perspective. The two players departed the court to a standing ovation. "I tried to - I don't know - tried to find good words for that moment," Del Potro said after the match. "I told him to try to be calm. And I told him to think about his family, his baby. And that sometimes the heart comes before the tennis match or the tennis life."

The "yoke" of Christ's love and humility transformed an intense international sports competition into a moment of compassion. Jesus calls us to embrace a faith that enables us to see one another with the eyes of God: with love that isn’t compromised by self-interest and rationalization; with compassion that isn’t measured but offered totally and unreservedly, completely and without limit or condition; with hope that is centered in gratitude for the many ways God's presence is revealed in our midst. It’s faith that is not compromised by "adult" complexities and
complications, but embraced with "child-like" directness and optimism.

The heart of Jesus’ message is: “Come to me” – a call to a personal relationship. Here is a marked shift in religious behavior. He doesn’t say: “Keep the law!” Jesus says: “Come to me!” There’s a significant difference. A religion which is seen and experienced only as adherence to legalistic impersonal norms, and not as a joyful life-giving relationship with the Author of life is false. In coming to the person of Jesus, we discover that, far from being burdened, we’re liberated. Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon our shoulders. The yoke was a fitted wood collar placed on the back of the oxen pulling a plow. It was custom-fitted, and sanded smooth so it wouldn’t chafe or bruise the neck of the much-needed and very precious oxen. As the son of a carpenter and following his father Joseph’s trade, Jesus undoubtedly made some yokes. God’s yoke is custom-made to fit well the needs and abilities of each of us whom he invites to wear it. Love makes every burden light.

Actually, Jesus is referring to a specific burden. In his time and place, sincere seekers were hog-tied by the burdensome legal and moral prescriptions of rabbinic Judaism. Those practicing the Old Testament faith were heavy laden with the burden which the scribes had begun to put upon the laity. The rules of the priestly purity had been extended to laymen and country folk at this time. In contrast to the law, Jesus’ yoke is easy and his burden light. For Jesus’ prophetic and nontechnical interpretation of the Old Testament law placed emphasis on justice, mercy and the love of God. In contrast, the logic of the scribes was anything but uplifting and user-friendly. It was about maintaining consistency, expediency, and logical clarity as though they were the highest expression of humanity. Naturally, the law doesn’t see the individual; it has no ears for the human story. So it easily becomes a form of oppression and tyranny. Because the adherents of the law lack emotional depth, they don’t understand the unfolding complexity of experience. They are, in short, alienated from themselves and from one another. They build walls of reason to protect themselves; they wear an armor of steel so that nothing can stir their soul.
Paul speaks about possessing this spirit of Christ: *Brothers and sisters: You are not in the flesh; On the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you. Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.* How is the Spirit of Christ then different from the confines of the law? Jesus’ truth is not about truth crushing falsehood, truth punishing the liar and the criminal and locking them away; but his is about inspiring reform, truth opening up the horizons of the unexplored life; truth bestowing hope, mercy, and faith. It inspires joy and creativity, not obedience and conformity. Who is Jesus if not the one who turns water into wine at weddings, who eats with sinners, who prepares a seaside breakfast at the crack of dawn for his disciples, who cries at the sight of his deceased friend, Lazarus, and cures the sick on the Sabbath? And unless we too learn to let go of our own yoke and experience the depths of his joy and his sorrow, as Paul says, we do not belong to Him.

The Word of God today presents us with a choice between two possible principles by which we can live life. One is to live by the “flesh.” At the center of the “flesh” principle are things like pride and arrogance, ambition and fierce competition that elbows the competitor; words and deeds that say: “If they hit, I hit back harder!” The other choice is to live by the “Spirit.” St. Paul uses the word “Spirit” twenty times in the chapter we heard from today’s excerpt. It refers to participation in the divine life, giving oneself over to Jesus. Spirit-filled folk are full of promise, life and growth. It’s a question of seeking the best in our human development, not adjusting ourselves to the ways of the world, but looking to Christ to understand what’s truly human – the humility, openness and childlike trust that Jesus practiced and loved. In Jesus and in His Spirit our burdens are lifted, our hearts are renewed and our own spirits are refreshed so we can love as He loved.

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