32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
11.10.19

COURAGE IN THE FACE OF CHALLENGE

When I was in junior high school, we had physical education every day of school. I chose PE for first period before it would get too hot and so I did not have to compete with my sisters for the shower in the morning before school. The class was a mixture of seventh, eighth and ninth grade boys and every Friday we began class by running around the perimeter fence of the school property which was almost exactly one mile.

In Southern California with few bad weather days we pretty much every Friday began our class with our run. Late in the year as a seventh grader, as we lined up for the start of our run, I found myself somehow in the midst of a group of ninth graders and before I could extract myself the teacher blew his whistle starting our run. In order to keep from being trampled I tried to keep up with them and as the crowd thinned out my pride kicked in and I stretched my legs and kept up with them. They all just seemed to be coasting along, chatting and joking as I tagged along in the midst of the big boys. We were expected to come close to or improve our finishing times each week, so I was anticipating the displeasure of the teacher since we had seemingly been coasting along the whole way, so I was surprised when it was my best time thus far that year!

Later, when I started running Cross Country, I learned that who one runs with can be important. Regularly our coach would drive us several miles from our school and we would run up and down hills until we were exhausted and then he would leave, saying: “See you back at school.” We were expected to run the whole way back and we would become strung out according to our ability and level of conditioning. Often, we would end up in little groups of two or three trotting along and sometimes we would get tired and stop running and walk. I later learned that there is usually a common element among the groups that would stop and walk and among the groups that would keep running. It is much easier to stop and walk if someone else is doing it; it also is easier to keep running if those you are with keep running. Peer pressure and examples can be powerful and either motivating or debilitating.

In our first reading we have the heroic story of a family of seven brothers and their mother who persevered unto death. Each subsequent martyr was stirred on by the example of his predecessors when perhaps his own courage might have faltered a bit until at last their mother, having tragically witnessed the torture and execution of her sons, herself gave a powerful witness to her religion and was murdered.
They were so passionate about their faith, about their religion and their culture that they were willing to be put to death rather than deny who they were by violating their laws in any manner. They died not just because they refused to consume pork but because they refused to succumb to the pressure to conform to the dominate culture. They refused to assimilate or be assimilated. Their faith gave them the courage to say “yes” to God no matter the consequences because they believed in God’s love and wisdom and mercy and justice.

As followers of Jesus, as people who call ourselves Christians, we are called to have that same kind of courage and faith. We are called to refuse to succumb to the lures of our consumer and individualist culture and remain rooted in God and in community. We gather together in order to remember our heroes so their examples can spur us onto victory. We gather together to renew our courage and find the strength together to keep running in the race. We gather to encourage one another when our strength or belief falters. And we gather together to try and avoid becoming fanatics.

In the Gospel Jesus is not engaged in a dialogue or debate with the Sadducees. They were really not interested in his response to their proposed absurd situation. They were not there to listen or to learn but only to make their point. They squandered the opportunity they had to truly question God and actually learn some things because of their delusions about already knowing or having all the answers. Winston Churchill said: "A fanatic is one who can't change his mind and won't change the subject." As disciples of Jesus we must keep our hearts and minds open or we too risk shutting out the truth and shutting out God. We must listen to Jesus in our hearts and in the gospel proclaimed. We must really listen, especially to the parts which really challenge us and the parts we don’t want to hear or we run the risk of becoming a fanatic.

We gather together here so the Lord may direct our hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ. With God’s grace we seek to follow Jesus and find the middle way between being fickle and obstinate, between being arrogant and apathetic, and between being legalistic and morally lax. May we strive to be both faithful and charitable, to remain both committed and compassionate, and to seek both unity and truth. With God’s grace may we truly become like the saints we admire, live Jesus, and be examples for one another and for those who will follow us. May God be blessed.

_Paul Dechant, OSFS_