

I would like to begin today by noting the change of church seasons. We have concluded the season of the Incarnation, and now our attention is turned with Jesus toward His suffering, His cross, His Victory. Behind us is the green colors of the Epiphany season, and we have put on purple, which is the color of penitence and preparation. Today we enter into the Pre-Lenten season beginning to prepare for the disciplines of Lent. We are, in a real sense, preparing for battle with full intentionality. Much of our lives are characterized by sublime and happy moments, but there are also times when we are called to cross the desert, the wilderness, of the soul. Such struggles are the moments for which Lent prepares us.

We tend to be dualistic in modern life. By this I mean that we often make a hard distinction in our thinking between body and soul, and thus, in our approach to life. But the reality is that everything we do involves both body and soul. These two aspects are inseparably bound together in the unity which is the human being. Every exercise we undertake touches both our internal lives and our external bodies. If you want to build muscle, you go to the gym, but this does not happen without an act of the will and a determination and decision to do so. Most of the time our physical training depends heavily upon willing resolution. Physical progress requires a regime of exercise over time and is therefore dependent on strength of character.

Likewise, growth in godliness requires a measure of physical discipline. If one wants to pray more, the he should make time in his schedule to do so. That means that chores must be accomplished in a timely manner. That means he must stay up later or rise earlier to spend time in prayer. The care and health of the body must be addressed in order to nurture the health of the soul. The two are inseparably linked so an overly dualistic approach is not helpful.

Of course this begs the question, "Why are we concerned with exercising our bodies and

souls?" The answer? We wish to persevere in faithful and loving obedience to God throughout our lives. We wish to endure the trials of life that invariably come our way so we prepare as best we can outside those times of distress. Besides this, growth in godliness is very much concerned with controlling our bodily impulses and the thoughts and desires that arise from those impulses. We must not overestimate our ability to endure such temptation so we learn discipline while our souls are quiet and at peace.

Thankfully, The Church in her wisdom has established the ecclesiastical calendar to get us ready, not only for the trials that we face in this life, but also to prepare us for the next life. The Church, thus invites us into a deeper relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit by paying close attention to the cycle of our lives together.

As a side note, I recently heard it said that our identities are described by the calendar we follow. There is a lot of truth in this. For many Americans, the seasons with which they are primarily concerned are the various sports seasons. We just finished the football season, now we've got hockey and basketball, and then baseball. And then we start that cycle of life again. For many, it is the academic calendar for they define their lives mostly by when school starts, when the breaks come, and when Summer vacation begins and for how long. Our calendars are intimately connected to the liturgies of our lives. Let us at least be aware of this connection. Let us, as a parish, a community of faith, be intentional about which calendar we order our lives around.

Now turning our attention to today's readings. In the epistle, St. Paul makes the analogy that we are all spiritual athletes striving for the ultimate prize – the divine life of eternity. The apostle here is encouraging us to put on a seriousness about how we live. We need to adopt a training regime so that we would not falter in the race that is set before us. We need to learn to live in temperance – discipline of the body in order to reach the goal that God graciously

has for us at the end. We must learn to say no to things that may give us actual pleasure in the moment because there is a much greater reward for us in the long term. This is the principle of delayed gratification extrapolated over a lifetime.

One of the problems we face in implementing a life of spiritual discipline and purpose is our lack of faith. Now I don't mean to suggest that we would deny the fundamental precepts of our faith. We are fine assenting to the creeds. What we struggle to believe is that all of the denial of self will be worth it in the end. After all, is it really all that bad to indulge in a little sinful pleasure in the moment? The race we are running is so long, and the reward? ...

Well we are exactly like the laborer in the parable of the householder and the vineyard from the gospel reading today. We work all the day long, and at then end, we get a penny. A stinking little penny. And then we start to look around at the guy next to us, who is just now starting his work. And he ends up getting the same thing that we do? It is easy to understand how we begin to feel that it just isn't worth it.

Now for most of us this doesn't mean that we turn our back on the faith completely and finally, though there is no doubt that some will. We've even seen such falling away in our small parish. For most of us though, we just begin to slack off a bit. I'm just not going to work as hard at my prayer life. I'm just not going to go to as many worship services. I'm not going to show up at the work day. I've done my part, and I'll just let someone else take it from here. I'll compromise a little here and a little there. I'll do some pleasurable little things that perhaps five years ago, I would never entertain. I'm going to live my best life which, interpreted means, I've got something better to do than to spend the effort to go to prayer or bible study or to this or that. I'm good just meeting the minimum requirements. We are just going to sit this one out. To use the words of St. Paul, in the spiritual race that is set before us, we have disqualified ourselves.

Brothers and Sisters, let us first give thanks to God, that Christ did not give up in His race. He powered through all the way to the end because He knew the glory that was to be had for Him and for all the faithful at the end. From Philippians 2 we read, “And (*Christ*) being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross. ⁹ Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name.” Christ endured for us. We will be as determined for Him?

And secondly, let us be reminded that we train and strive and work, not for a fleeting moment of pleasure or enjoyment, but for an eternal reward, a weight of glory that we cannot comprehend. Do we believe this? Do we realize that we are contending for an imperishable crown or do we hold the reward of faithful living to be not actually worth all that much bother?

In our current existence, all we may see is a penny. We might as well have picked it up off of the ground. We hold the reward that God has set before us cheaply and so we do not exert ourselves all that much. We forget that our labor compared to the blood and sweat and tears and triumph of Christ is actually what is insignificant. Our sense of proportion is all distorted. Our spiritual eyes have been blinded by the immediacy of this world. So this morning we are being challenged to reorient our ideas. The alarm is going off and it is time to awake out of our deep sleep. It is time wake up and to answer the call of the householder. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

It seems that we are again at an explicit fork in the road. The gospel challenges us to answer the call of the household to go work in the vineyard. The Old Testament lesson from Joshua 1 puts it this way, “as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. ⁶ Be strong and of good courage, ... that you may observe to do according to all the law

which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.”

Let us notice a few things here. The path we are called to walk, the labor we are called to undertake, is not easy. It is indeed difficult. It takes strength and courage. At the same time let us not neglect that God promises to be with us in this journey. We do not go anywhere where He Himself has not tread. We are not called to deny ourselves in anything that He Himself has not forfeited on our behalf. Also, let us not miss the promised result. “For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” The final reward at the end of our labors, at the end of our earthly sojourn, is most glorious. But there is also success and prosperity to be had in the midst of our labors too. Obedience to God will bring us joy and peace. There are certainly trials to be had in this life, but let us not overlook all of the blessings we have from God everyday. Walking with God, working for God, giving ourselves to Him as living sacrifices, such a disposition of ourselves toward God will bring blessings from Him. And on the other hand, a life lived for the self will lead to impoverishment, fear, sorrow, and eternal condemnation.

Now certainly, to some extent, this choice is set before us everyday. But today it is brought before us front and center. It is time to stand up and answer the householder’s call. To this end, we will be undertaking some spiritual training in the Lenten weeks ahead. We are called upon by the Church to engage and prepare through denying ourselves of a few of the comforts and conveniences that surround us and lull us into complacency. So how will you respond? What discipline will you take up? What commitment will you make to personalize and represent your response to God. And may your commitment, no matter how small or trivial it may initially seem, spur you forward to a deeper love and a persevering obedience to

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Septuagesima Sunday

K. Bartel, 6

Our Lord. Such loyalty to God will bring you blessings in this life. Such loyalty to God will bring you a glorious imperishable crown and joy everlasting in the life of the world to come.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.