

Homily.22OrdA.8.30.20
St. Bernard Church
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Today's Gospel raises one troubling question for every one of us:

“Are we in front of Jesus or behind Him?”

Jesus has just given Peter the keys to the kingdom, a clear grant of authority.

Now, Jesus challenges Peter, and He is challenging us, to follow Him. He says to Peter, “Get behind me.” And He says the same thing to us. “Get behind me. Follow me.”

This is one of the biggest questions each one of us has to answer in our lives.

Do we trust that God is greater and wiser than we are? Do we trust that He knows better than we do what we should be doing every minute of our lives? Have we given control of our lives to Him?

Jesus says to us in the second part of today's Gospel that if we want to save our lives we will lose them. By “saving our lives,” He means doing what we want to in our lives as opposed to giving control to God.

So when Jesus then says we will save our lives by losing them, “losing them” means making a deep, genuine act of surrendering and abandoning our lives into the hands of God.

What does this mean?

Aren't we all told to “follow our dreams?”

Let me give you an example of how this can work.

I was somewhat of a basketball star in high school. But injuries cut my basketball seasons short my junior and senior year.

I went to college and law school, married, and became a successful lawyer in Tulsa.

Despite having a very good life, I started getting restless. I had always thought I was meant to be a basketball coach. That was my dream. So despite

having a good job, a great wife and several young children, one day I wrote a letter to the head basketball coach at the University of Tulsa.

I told the coach in the letter that I wanted to be a volunteer, unpaid assistance coach for him. My plan was that after doing that for several years maybe he would recommend me for a coaching position at a high school or college. I would take it from there.

The coach brought me in for an interview. He would have granted my request except that he had a similar offer from a guy with more coaching experience, so he went with this other man.

So I kept practicing law. But I still sensed that there was something else I should be doing.

On a Saturday morning in February of 1988, I went to my office, took out a pad of legal-sized paper, put a + on the upper left side of the page and a – on the upper right side of the page. Under the + sign, I listed what I considered my positive characteristics and talents. Under the – sign, I listed my negative qualities. I thought if I analyzed this information, what I should do with my life would jump off the page into my brain.

That didn't work.

I hate to see this, but at the time I never thought of praying, of asking God to reveal to me His specific will for my life.

Later that same year, in July, my wife Connie and I attended a marriage and family conference in Ohio. After dinner on the Saturday night of the conference, there was a repentance service. I remember standing up, going through the motions of doing whatever the prayer leader said to do.

Then, and this is very hard to describe, I experienced God's presence in me, as if He had penetrated every cell of my being with His presence. I knew immediately that it was Him.

He was communicating to me that He was real and that His love for me was real, even though I did not feel worthy of that.

I didn't know things like this happened. And I wasn't consciously asking for anything.

This event changed my life in two very profound ways. I knew that if I did in my life what God wanted, it didn't matter whether I had the talent to pull it

off. I knew God would make up for what I lacked with His grace. So I could never tell Him no.

Secondly, I soon came to realize that God was communicating His specific will for my life all the time. I just needed to expect His communication, be attentive to it and be committed to being obedient.

So God has led me to do things I never would have come up with on my own. I started a ministry for men called Brother House. I left my job as a lawyer and began working for the Diocese of Tulsa as Family Life Director. Then the Bishop asked me to be Executive Director of our Catholic Charities.

In 2008, God led Connie and me to move to upstate New York, where I worked for Catholic Charities. After 5 years there, Connie started pushing for us to move back to Tulsa. I asked her if we could defer that decision for at least a year, but then I added these fateful words: “unless something special came up.” She agreed.

Two weeks later, we got a text message asking me if I would be interested in being a chaplain for a big car dealership in Tulsa. The owner, a good Catholic man, wanted a person to help support his 250 employees. It was pretty obvious that being a chaplain for a car dealer qualified as special, so back to Tulsa we came.

A couple of quotes, from sources more authoritative than me:

From Thomas Merton:

“For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it the germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men...We must learn to realize that the love of God seeks us in every situation...”

From Fr. David Fleming, an expert in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola:

“God is an active God. He is ever at work in people’s lives, inviting, directing, guiding, proposing, suggesting...God calls. We respond...God initiates; we answer. We do not strike out on our own. We are to follow...It is a spirituality of attentiveness, of watching and waiting...”

When we are content to walk behind Jesus, not ahead of Him, we get the benefit of our human talent AND the power of God’s grace, which then becomes available to us and makes all the difference.