

## 7<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (February 19, 2023)

If you are a sports fan like me, you know this is a great time of year. Last Sunday we were treated to a great, high-drama Super Bowl that went down to the last seconds when Kansas City kicked the game-winning field goal. This is also the time for high school sports excitement—the state wrestling tournament just finished up and the boys and girls basketball playoffs are in full swing. We know that such success doesn't come easy; it takes a whole lot of training, practice, dedication. It takes one's full intention and effort; a half-hearted, 'no big deal' attitude just won't cut it.

The same thing can be said in so many other arenas. Our farmers know how much work and dedication it takes to get the machinery ready and fields prepped for another planting season. Our school teachers and staff know all the hard work involved in preparing lesson plans, grading papers and other homework, and giving that special time and effort to the student needing some personal attention. And what can we say about the doctors, nurses and other medical staff who take such good care of us when we need it? I was reminded of that once again, up close and personal, with my recent surgery—for which I am so grateful. By the way, don't worry: I am taking the time for rest that my body tells me I need...

We honor and respect all that effort, all that dedication, all that self-sacrifice. But...do we give that same kind of attention and dedication to our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ? The gospel today forces us to confront that question face to face; it's one of the toughest passages in the entire Bible. "Love your enemies...pray for those who persecute you...be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" Jesus can't be serious here, can he?? Oh, yes he can...and he most certainly is.

Pope Francis recently spoke about the temptation we can experience to be satisfied with a spiritual half-heartedness, a minimalism that says "I haven't killed or stolen or hurt anyone...and therefore I'm fine and needn't go any farther." Instead, as the Holy Father reminds us: "Jesus invites us to aspire to the maximum possible...He does not say 'I love you up to a certain point. No, true love is never up to a certain point, and is never satisfied; love always goes beyond.'" And Jesus, of course, gives the perfect example of this 'going beyond' by dying on the cross after forgiving those who murdered him. Now, this kind of maximal love does not mean ignoring or excusing evil, but it does mean refusing to be conquered or enslaved by evil and by bitterness and unforgiveness. It also means remembering that we are all children of the same Father who passionately desires the salvation of every single person—even and especially those who are guilty of great sin or injustice. Remember Jesus, also in today's gospel, reminding us that our Father in heaven 'makes his sun rise on the bad and the good'.

A few days ago I read about someone who is an amazing example of this kind of 'maximal love' that Jesus calls all of us to pursue. Titus Brandsma was a Dutch Carmelite priest and philosophy professor in the early-to-mid 1900's. He taught the value and dignity of every person without exception and the equality and goodness of every race. In particular, he condemned the unjust treatment of the Jews in Nazi Germany under Hitler's control. In 1941 Brandsma refused to allow the Dutch Catholic press to publish anything from the Nazi sympathizers in the Netherlands; he was finally arrested and deported to the death camp at Dachau.

While at Dachau he suffered torture and other abuse; he was beaten so badly that he was sent to the camp hospital where such inmates were routinely put to death. But an amazing thing happened in that hospital; something we can indeed call it a miracle. A nurse was on the staff; one of her gruesome tasks was to give a lethal injection to those condemned to death. She later told how the victims hated and insulted her, and she returned hatred for hatred. But she was stunned when Fr. Brandsma was brought in and treated her with a tender respect; she said “One time he took my hand and said to me ‘You poor, poor girl, I’ll pray for you!’” He had the same compassion toward all his torturers, saying “They, too, are children of the good God, and perhaps there is still something left in them.” Just like Jesus also said in today’s gospel: the Father ‘causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.’

On July 25, 1942, a doctor gave this nurse the syringe filled with carbolic acid. She gave Brandsma the shot, and he died about ten minutes later. This was something the nurse had done without a second thought hundreds and hundreds of times before, but this time she said she ‘felt sick that whole day.’ She later said that the face of that elderly priest had remained printed in her memory, because she had saw something there that she had never known before. She simply said, ‘He had compassion for me.’ Later on that nurse embraced Jesus and the Catholic faith. As one author put it: “In this way, with the tenderness of a humiliated father, Brandsma was able to bring to life the one who had just given him death.” A miracle of healing, of a most amazing grace? No one will ever convince me that it is not. By the way, Pope Francis canonized Fr. Brandsma on May 15 last year.

Again, we rightly honor and admire the efforts and dedication of athletes on all levels who strive for excellence, and of all others who do the same in their respective fields and careers. After all—without that effort and dedication, there would be nothing to admire. Do we strive for that same excellence, that ‘maximum possible’ in our lives as followers and lovers of Jesus Christ and that he challenges us, out of love, to pursue? “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Fr. Titus Brandsma strove for that perfection by the grace of God; he refused to be satisfied with a minimal effort, ‘just enough to get by’. That is why he is now known as St. Titus Brandsma...and it led directly to the conversion of that nurse who killed him.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Jesus meant that, you know—and not only for Dutch Carmelite priests or others that we might be tempted to honor only from afar. Jesus meant every word for every single one of us. Genuinely striving for that love, that prayer, and that perfection can and does accomplish miracles of conversion and healing in ways we may not understand but are nonetheless very real. Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent are just a few days away—what better time to take up the challenge that Jesus extends to us? St. Titus Brandsma, pray that we too may desire and become instruments of Jesus’ saving grace as you were.