

Septuagesima 2022
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish
Father Craig Looney
1 Cor. 9.24-27 St. Matt. 20.1-16



Today's two story lines...Paul talks about running a race...Jesus talks about labor relations...both stories are connected and are about hard work...and what we get for our hard work!

It's interesting the Winter Olympics are also taking place at this time. The athletes competing in the various events have worked hard to get there. Even with all of their hard work, there is no guarantee they will take the gold, silver or bronze medals...or any medal.

Competitive sports were no less important in Paul's time than they are today. Many runners...Paul tells us...take part in the race. But only one of the runners takes the prize...a laurel wreath. The laurel wreath was a symbol of Apollo and the person who won the prize, was thought to be spiritually blessed. The laurel wreath was a beautiful thing...but it didn't last. Eventually the leaves would dry up...the laurel wreath died.

Paul compares the Christian life to running a race, with a major difference. We already possess the Grand Prize...a crown that will last forever. Everlasting life is the Grand Prize...and it is what waits for us when we cross the finish line after our time here on earth. And there is no second or third or consolation prize...only the Grand Prize.

The race we are running is a spiritual one. Liturgically speaking...our racetrack is the Pre-Lenten and Lenten Seasons. Paul tells us he is running toward the finish line like a boxer who isn't holding back any punches. He works hard to keep his body under complete spiritual control even when he is subjected to body blows.

Here I must admit I am not a fan of boxing or Monday Night WWE. But I get the point. Paul is telling us we must work hard at keeping our spiritual lives in order...especially when we find ourselves helping others to know and love Christ.

Coaches who don't follow the rules when training someone for the Olympics disqualify themselves. What about those who are running the race called the Christian life?

Roman Catholic priest, Father Ronald Knox, wrote, "Septuagesima has an epistle which warns us that it is never too late to be damned, a gospel which tells us that it is never too late to be saved." Paul wants to make certain we keep our spiritual lives in order...so we don't lose sight of the Grand Prize.

The Gospel is the *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*...and it is one of Jesus' familiar short stories about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. The man who owns the vineyard needs help harvesting his grapes. He goes out and hires men to work in his vineyard at 6 AM, 9 AM, Noon, 3 PM and 5 PM. All the hired men agreed to work for a silver coin...the Denarius. Let's say the Denarius was worth \$20...acceptable wages at the time for a day's work.

It's now 6 PM and time for the men to get paid. If we had been working in the vineyard for 12 hours...of course we would expect to be paid more than \$20. But those men who had worked only one hour were paid first before anyone else...the same \$20. Everyone else got paid the same \$20. It doesn't seem fair...does it? But the Gospel isn't about labor laws or overtime pay or what we think is fair...it's about God giving freely what is his and his alone to give...life everlasting in Heaven.

The Gospel concludes with Jesus saying the last will be first and the first will be last. What Jesus is saying is God's justice surpasses earthly justice. If we perform our tasks in his vineyard with joy and enthusiasm and love...if we run the race Paul talks about in the way we should...it doesn't matter when we started work...when we were 10 or 110. Once we finish our work we all get paid the same wage...the Grand Prize called Heaven. And there is no more or less Heaven. Just Heaven!

On that day we want to stand with Saint Paul and say, "I have done my best in the race. I have run the full distance, and I have kept the Faith. And now there is waiting for me the prize of victory...not only for me, but to all who wait with love for him to appear".

And God will say, "Well done. Come and receive the Grand Prize that has been waiting for you".

