

Septuagesima 2024
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish
Father Craig Looney
I Cor. 9.24-27 St. Matt. 20.1-16



Televised football games such as the Rose Bowl are a big deal in my family. I have to admit I didn't have much interest in sports when I was growing up. But it was exciting to watch the Michigan Wolverines beat the Alabama Crimson Tide...and then go on to beat the Washington Huskies at the National Championship. The Wolverines last won the Rose Bowl in 1998.

Saint Paul talks about sports in today's Epistle. He may have competed in sports events in his younger days. He certainly considered physical health as important as spiritual health. Paul says the Christian life is like running a race. Athletes who run marathons have to train and train and then train some more. Football teams who hope to make it to the Rose Bowl have to practice and practice and then practice some more. Even with all the training there is no guarantee marathon runners will get the grand prize. Even with all the practice there is no guarantee a football team that makes it to the Rose Bowl will win the game and take home the trophy.

There is a major difference in the race called the Christian life and the marathons Paul is talking about or the Rose Bowl...we already have the Grand Prize. Marathon runners who made it to the finish line received a wreath made of laurel leaves. They were beautiful to look at...but they eventually faded away and were just a memory. The Wolverines will celebrate their epic win for years...but it too will fade away...a story to be passed down to their children and grandchildren.

Marathon runners and the Wolverines earned their prizes and they deserved everything that came along with the win. Our Grand Prize is everlasting life in heaven. Our Grand Prize isn't something we earned or deserved. But it is what God wants us to have, because we are his children and he loves us. At every Mass we hear Jesus assure us in the Comfortable Words...“God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life”.

If we already have the Grand Prize God wants us to have...everlasting life in

heaven...why does Paul say we have to continue to practice? Toward the end of his life Saint Paul summarized his work in these compelling words, *“I run straight for the finish line. I am like a boxer who doesn't waste his punches. I harden my body with blows and bring it under complete control, to keep myself from being disqualified after having called others to the contest”*. What Paul is saying is our lives have to be as spiritually disciplined through prayer, compassion, and service to others, as much as the mental and physical discipline of those marathon runners and football players who can only hope for the Grand Prize. We disqualify ourselves from our Grand Prize...life everlasting in heaven...when we don't take our spiritual lives seriously.

The Pre-Lenten and Lenten Seasons are a proving ground...a practice field...the time to follow Saint Paul's advice, and to ask God for help in our spiritual lives. Set some time aside each day for personal prayer and Bible reading. This is all part of what we do as Christians running the race, certain that we already have the Grand Prize...everlasting life in heaven.

The Gospel is about the Kingdom of Heaven and answering God's invitation to do our work now here on earth, and join him in heaven. The workers in the Gospel were all invited to go work in the farmer's vineyard. They went to work at different times and all agreed to the same daily wage...let's call it \$20.00. When it came time to be paid...the men who had worked all day expected to be paid more than the men who had worked just one hour. They complained. The Gospel makes it clear the owner of the vineyard (God) can do whatever he wants with the Grand Prize...and he gives it to everyone who finishes the race regardless of when they started. There is no more or less of heaven...just heaven.

We have the Grand Prize in our site and that's a good reason to run the race ahead of us. 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 to each of us, “Well done. The Grand Prize is yours”.

