

Homily for June 20, 2010 (12th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Father's Day)
Zechariah 12:10-11, 13:1; Psalm 63 (vv.); Galatians 3:26-29; Luke 9:18-24

Losing...to Win

I'm not much of a fan of NBA basketball. It seems to involve too much money, too much hype, and to distract too many young people with unfulfilled dreams of superstardom and super wealth. I must admit, however, that I have been following this year's playoffs a little more closely than in the past.

Part of it the reason is that my hometown team, the Milwaukee Bucks, actually made the playoffs for the first time in years...even though they lost in the first round. ☹️ But the bigger part has been witnessing the gritty effort of individual players like the Suns' Steve Nash or the Lakers' center Andrew Bynum, who is suffering from a knee injury that will surely require surgery but continues to play. It has been painful just to watch him hobble up and down the court, trying to contribute but obviously hurting and frustrated that he isn't playing at full strength or effectiveness.

Andrew Bynum played 36 minutes in Game 5 of the series. Some would question why his coach, Phil Jackson, would play a limping player so much or why Bynum would risk even more serious injury by playing. But anyone who has been an athlete, particularly those who have competed for championships, would readily understand.

Such chances do not come often. When they do, no athlete wants to be left wondering "what could have been." They're willing to "leave it all on the court," course, track, or field. They're also willing to make the more anonymous and often monotonous sacrifices in the gym, practice field, weight room and training room—the months and sometimes years of effort—in order to have that chance. They're willing to lose in order to win.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus invited his disciples to lose in order to win. After asking them what others had to say about him, he then asked them what they thought. Peter, in turn, proclaimed him as "the Christ," that is the Messiah. In response, Jesus told them something that shocked and scandalized them: the Christ they wanted and expected wasn't the Christ he was called to be. Instead, he said, "The Son of Man must suffer greatly at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised."

This could not have made much sense to the disciples. Not only would the Promised One of Israel not be their warrior-champion against their oppressors, but he would suffer and die at the hands of their religious

leaders? Even worse, if they wished to follow him then they would have to take up the cross and be willing to suffer the same fate? It could not be.

The disciples were familiar with crucifixion. According to the ancient historian Josephus, at around the time Jesus was still a child, a Galilean named Judas led a revolt against Roman rule and in particular against the census which underscored the imperial power. The rebellion ended in disaster. After burning down a city where Judas and his fellow revolutionaries tried to storm an armory, the Romans crucified them all. Two thousand crosses lined the roads—an abject lesson to anyone who would dare to challenge the empire.

The cross, then, stood for terror, defeat and shame. Yet in Luke's gospel Jesus told his disciples that they must be willing to embrace and carry it not just one agonizing time but *daily!* "For whoever wishes to save his life," Jesus concluded, "will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." They had to be willing to lose in order to win.

Our crosses come in many shapes, sizes and weights. Some are chosen. I sometimes experience the vows that I have taken as a religious—the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience—as forms of the cross. All of them require that I give up things that are significant, especially in our culture: the opportunities for private property and personal wealth, sex and marriage; and the freedom to do what I want, when I want, how I want and with whomever I want. But I also experience in those same vows a profound sense of wealth, intimacy, peace, happiness and freedom in love and service. I have to lose in order to win.

Of course, religious and priests have no corner on the market of crosses, much less on virtue. Spouses and parents also know the cross. People who are experiencing a life-changing illness know it, too. Anyone trying to ethically maintain a business or professional practice in today's very challenging economic climate knows the cross. The people living and working in the Gulf Coast must contend with a cross that is sticky, dirty, oily and toxic. Those who saw their loved ones swept away by those flash floods in Arkansas were handed a sudden and almost unbearable cross.

For Christians the cross is not an option. Paul reminded the Galatians that regardless of race, ethnicity, social condition or gender "are all one in Christ Jesus" by virtue of our baptism. Jesus similarly reminded his disciples that while he would definitively carry the cross for the salvation of the world, anyone who wished to walk in that salvation must also walk the way of the cross.

We must be willing to lose in order to win. It is as true in life and in eternity as it is in the NBA Finals. +