

2.4.2024 Sexagesima (St. Luke 8:4-15)

In 1983, 105 million people tuned in to watch the series finale of the television show MASH, making it the most-watched broadcast that year, but since that time, for the last 40 years, another event broadcast on the TV has taken the top spot every year - the Super Bowl. Last year, 115 million viewers watched the Chiefs play the Eagles, and apparently it's not just the big game, the party, and the 30 second \$7 million commercials that Americans love, because in 2023 ninety-three of the top one hundred television broadcasts were NFL games.

If we were asked the question of why watching football is so popular in American culture, we may all come up with a different answer. It could be the sense of community that comes from being a fan, the social interaction and meaningful relationships that are built on a shared passion for sports, the opportunity to escape - for just a little while - from the problems and difficulties of everyday life. Perhaps it's the thrill of victory, the drama of competition, or maybe, it's the cheap price we pay to receive all of those great benefits.

Football, and other spectator sports, offer us the opportunity to, in a sense, play the game without paying the price. As spectators, we don't have to spend countless hours conditioning our bodies and training our minds for the day we'll step onto the field and put ourselves at great risk of serious injury. As spectators, we turn on the television, open a bag of chips, pour a drink, and have a seat on the couch; and yet, when our team wins, we win. All of the victory, with none of the cost!

In a world where we're always looking for the best return on our investment, spectator sports pay huge dividends, but the truth I would ask you to consider this morning is the fact that the Christian life is not a spectator sport. Spectator sports cost us nothing, but Jesus told those who would follow Him, to count the cost of discipleship. At a time when huge crowds were gathering around Him, He turned to them and said, *"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple. Which of you,*

wishing to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost to see if he has the resources to complete it? Otherwise, if he lays the foundation and is unable to finish the work, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This man could not finish what he started to build.' Or what king on his way to war with another king will not first sit down and consider whether he can engage with ten thousand men the one coming against him with twenty thousand? And if he is unable, he will send a delegation while the other king is still far off, to ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any one of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26-33 BSB).

These are the costly terms of discipleship that Jesus shared with a huge crowd of spectators that were following Him. Like people at a Super Bowl party, the crowd loved the free food, cheap entertainment, and the opportunity to escape from the problems and difficulties of everyday life, but our Lord doesn't call us to be fans, He calls us to be His followers, to be Christians in the most accurate sense of the word, to be "little Christs" by denying ourselves, carrying our own cross daily, and losing our lives out of love for God and our neighbor.

Christianity is not a spectator sport. Our Lord didn't tell us to sit down and watch the show, but rather to *sit down and count the cost* of being His disciple, and if we use the Epistle we read this morning to do so, we find that cost to be nothing less than our life. In the passage we read, St. Paul described the enormous obstacles he faced, the unimaginable trials he endured, and through his example we come to understand the great cost of authentic Christian discipleship. Paul endured prison, scourging, stoning, shipwrecks, persecution, hatred, hunger, and thirst. He literally became a little Christ by offering his life as a living sacrifice to the One who died for Him.

St. Paul wasn't a spectator. He was a disciple, an apostle, a saint. He conditioned his body and trained his mind to follow Christ, and you may remember the way he used the example of athletes to encourage us to do the same. In the Epistle we read last Sunday, Paul wrote, "*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to*

receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

St. Paul counted the cost, disciplined his body, and finished the race our Lord gave him to run. From the time of his conversion on the Damascus road, to his martyrdom in Rome, the historical evidence clearly reveals the truth that following Jesus cost Paul his life, and therefore we recognize in his example that being a disciple of our Lord is not a spectator sport. Christianity is not a cheap way to receive an eternal reward. The message of the Gospel cannot be described as all of the victory, with none of the cost. Instead, Jesus tells us to *count the cost*, and He continually calls us to a life of sacrifice and of service to God and neighbor.

Discipleship is difficult. Jesus said, *“narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it”* (Matthew 7:14). Being a saint is a sacrifice. In the book of Acts, St. Luke wrote, *“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God”* (Acts 14:22). Jesus calls us to carry our cross (Luke 14:27), to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), and to lose our life for Him and the Gospel (Mark 8:35). When we live this life in such a manner, when we respond to the sacrificial love we’ve been shown by sacrificing our own lives to the One who first loved us, then we are an image of the *good ground* that our Lord spoke about in the parable we read this morning.

The Parable of the Sower is a familiar story about a sower who went out to sow his seed (Luke 8:4-15). This seed, which is the word of God, fell on four different types of ground, and the ground illustrates four different responses to hearing the word of God. Three of these responses, in the context of this sermon, might be described as the response of a spectator. The seed that fell by the way-side, the seed that fell upon a rock, and that seed which fell among thorns, was on ground that, according to Jesus, *heard* the word, some even received it with joy and *for a while believed*, but in times of temptation fell away, or ended up *choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of this*

life, and therefore brought no fruit to perfection. The spectators fell away, like a spectator at an NFL game would if they somehow ended up on the field and were confronted by a 6'3" 250 pound linebacker, but that seed which fell on good ground remained right where it was planted. Our Lord described that good ground as those who "in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15).

In this life there are spectators who *bring no fruit to perfection*, and there are disciples who *bring forth fruit with patience*, and the vast difference between the two was revealed by our Lord when He said, "*Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a seed; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*" (John 12:24). The difference between the spectator and the disciple is that the spectator loves the free food and cheap entertainment, but the disciple loves the Lord, and *falls to the ground and dies* for Him. This is what we find revealed in the example of St. Paul, and for those who are counting, this is the cost of following our Lord - a cost far too high for the spectator, but a price joyfully paid by the disciple. By the grace of God I beseech you: Don't be a fan, be a follower.