

**Homily for Mass and Blessing of the "Welcoming Jesus Statue"
St. Elizabeth Parish
Robinson, Illinois**

**25th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B
September 19, 2015**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, when I arrived in this diocese five years ago, one of the most common questions that I received from people that I met was whether I was a fan of the Chicago Cubs or the St. Louis Cardinals. Many were shocked when I told them that I was not a fan of either of those teams, since a good number of the faithful of our diocese tend to root for one or the other. My response to them was that I am a White Sox fan! This is generally an acceptable answer for Cardinals fans, but it does not go over quite as well with Cubs fans.

We like to follow sports, like baseball, because they give us an opportunity to be a part of something that is found in our human nature – the desire to be a part of something great. We follow our team of choice with the hope of seeing them be great, winning more games than losing. And ultimately, baseball fans look for that coveted greatness of being World Series Champions, something most Cardinals fans and White Sox

fans have experienced in their lifetime, and something to which Cubs fans still look forward...

I bring this up not to try to stir up the rivalry between these two teams, though it has certainly intensified as we get closer to the playoffs and both teams look to figure in the picture in some way or the other. I bring it up because this desire for greatness, so prominent in our human experience, can easily get distorted when seen only from a worldly perspective, divorced from the wisdom of our Catholic faith, which sheds some important light on the topic and has consequences for how we live our lives.

In the Gospel for today's Mass, we hear Jesus confront the disciples about an argument that they were having among themselves as they traveled to Capernaum. St. Mark writes that "[t]hey had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest" (Mark 9:34). We have to be careful in reading this passage and the conclusion that we might draw from the reaction of Jesus. Jesus is not saying to His disciples that it is wrong to desire to be great. In fact, Jesus encourages us to be great, as He tells His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount: "be perfect, just as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

This desire for greatness is what we would call one of the passions, a topic which is treated in our second reading from St. James. Passions, according to the tradition of our faith, are “emotions or movements of the sensitive appetite that incline us to act or not to act in regard to something felt or imagined to be good or evil.”¹ In themselves, these passions are neither good nor evil. They become morally good or evil based on how we choose to respond to them.

Keeping with our analogy of baseball, the desire for our team to be great is not a bad thing. However, that desire for greatness can be distorted by our human weakness and tendency toward sin. There are many unfortunate stories in the world of baseball where rival fans say or do things that are harmful to one another. The strong passion for victory and greatness can cause us to see others who are not in agreement with us as enemies, a threat to our achieving the happiness of being a fan of the winning team. In light of that perceived threat, we take actions to counteract that threat and often do disordered things.

This is what is at the heart of our first reading from the Book of Wisdom. The wicked person rebels against the just person, for the just person “sets himself against our doings” and is thus considered to be

“obnoxious” (Wisdom 2:12). The wicked person does not like that he is challenged for the way in which he chooses to respond to his passions in a disordered way, and so he responds by condemning the just man as an enemy to reject and destroy.

This is what St. James is trying to get across to us. The passions that are a part of our life are often responded to in ways that are disordered. All of the things that he lists are expressions of passions which are not evil in themselves, but the actions chosen in responding to those passions are. Our Catholic faith invites us to see that these passions are an opportunity for us to act in a good, or virtuous way, so as to act in accord with what is truly good, as opposed to something which only seems good, but is actually harmful to us, to our relationship with others, and ultimately, our relationship with God.

We are all probably aware of ways in which disordered modes of responding to passions have been detrimental to lives and relationships. It is seen in every aspect of life – in families, in marriages, in school, in the workplace, and, of course, in sports. So many of the negative and painful things that are a part of our lives come as a result of acting on passions in

sinful ways which eat away at the unity that the Lord desires for us in our relationship with Him and with others.

We can now better understand what Jesus is trying to communicate to His disciples regarding the passion for greatness. They must be careful not to let that desire for greatness get distorted by the ways of the world, thus introducing division among themselves on various levels. Achieving greatness in the worldly sense would be to see themselves as better than others. There would be a competition where there would be a winner, necessarily meaning that there would also be a loser. Their happiness would be rooted in their individual successes, and they would rejoice in the failures of the others. And greatness in that sense would result in their seeking honors and benefitting from what others would do for them.

This is not the greatness to which Jesus calls us. The greatness to which Jesus calls us is one that is directed toward unity and must be combined with other virtues, such as humility and charity. In fact, the call to greatness is a virtue in itself, known as magnanimity, a word which, when translated from Latin, literally means to be one who has a great (*magna*) soul (*anima*). Magnanimous people desire to do great things, but do so without being motivated by the desire to be noticed or honored for

what they have done. St. Thomas Aquinas describes the magnanimous person as one who “strives to do what is deserving of honor, yet not so as to think much of the honor accorded by man.”² In other words, as Christians, Jesus calls us to do great things, always motivated by a love for God and a pure love for our neighbor, as opposed to the worldly greatness which is so often motivated by self-love.

We see this in the example of the life of Jesus Himself. He did many great things, such as curing the sick and driving out demons. He did these great things out of love for others, not Himself. He was secure in the depth of His Father’s love for Him, so He had no need of the approval of men, and He did and said great things without calculating what others might think - He was free to act in total love, as opposed to being limited by the fear that we so often experience when choosing to act or not act, fearing that we might fail or that we might be rejected.

This highlights the constant need that we have to remain close to the love of Jesus in our lives. The more firmly rooted we are in our awareness of His love for us, the more willingly will we do those great things expected of us as Christians. And we will do them with great confidence and trust, not in our own abilities or strength, but in the gifts that *He* has so

generously given to us, so that we can say with St. Paul that “I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me” (Philippians 4:13).

There are plenty of examples of people who would be considered great from a worldly standard, people who have achieved great successes, often at the expense of others, and often for their own pride and glory. The world is very much in need of examples of people who are truly great according to the standard of the Gospel, men and women who live the virtue of magnanimity by doing great things for the glory of God and for love of their neighbor, not for love of themselves.

May our reception of the Eucharist today enflame our hearts to desire to live that greatness to which we have been called. May we never miss an opportunity to do all things, small or large, with true love, thus making all of our actions great. In a particular way, we pray that those pilgrims who will be travelling to the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, whom I will bless at the end of Mass, will return home with a greater appreciation for the greatness that couples and families are invited to express in their daily lives by living out their vocations with greater humility and charity toward one another.

After Mass, it will be my privilege to bless your new “Welcoming Jesus Statue,” which will serve as a constant reminder of the importance of inviting and welcoming people into our Church in imitation of Jesus Christ, who welcomed all. May the spirit of love for one another spread throughout this parish so that this will be a place where Jesus, who welcomes us in love, is in return welcomed and loved in one another.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ CCC, §1763.

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 129, art. 1.