

Homily, 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, year C
 St. Mary's Visitation Parish, Elm Grove,
 Father Nathan Reesman

Many of you know that I am not a runner or a bike rider. At all. In fact, you've probably heard my motto on this from time to time: "Why bike or run, when you can drive?" That is why the good Lord gave us automobiles.

But, for those of you who do such odd things as running and biking, you often tell me that a key component of it is endurance. That there is a point when you're out running or biking for long periods when it can begin to get tough- when you go forward on pure will alone. (By the way, driving can be like that too- especially when driving across Indiana for example. Pure endurance).

Really though, there are lots of endurance tests in life. It often happens like this: we begin something, possibly believing that we are truly prepared for the undertaking. And then we go forward. And then, like the marathon runner, we may reach a point where we begin to think: "I shouldn't have started this- what was I thinking?" Or maybe: "I wasn't as prepared as I thought- can I finish what I committed to?"

It's a common story, no? Think of the endurance test that is involved in getting through medical school or law school. Or with something like joining the football team through endless practices. Living out your marriage vows for 20, 30, 50 years. Getting through seminary and getting through years of priesthood. Quitting smoking or some other addiction. Learning to play an instrument- learning a language- a new career. Raising kids.

All of these things, in their own way, have a way of forcing us to the breaking point- a point where we ask: "Can I finish what I started? Can I endure to the end—of grad school, priesthood, football season, etc, etc."

What agonizing moments those are. Our confidence falls, we question ourselves, we question the very life defining commitments we've made. "Should I have married someone else? Did I make a tragic mistake? Do I really want to be a doctor, even if I'm halfway through med school? Maybe God did not want me to be a priest?"

Then we face a choice- we keep going, or we drop it.

This, I think, is where Jesus is going in today's very tough Gospel. He's saying: "As hard as running a race is, or building a tower, or fighting and wining a war, or, as hard as marriage is, relationships are, parenting is, grad school, high school, etc, etc- as hard as all of that is when it comes to committing ourselves all the way, the hardest endurance test of all- is discipleship." Following Christ makes the rest look like a walk in the park.

Oh, it starts out easy, like a good idea we think we can handle: “Sure, I’ll be Catholic- what the heck.” Get baptized, get some more sacraments, give 5 bucks a week, piece of cake.

But then, prayer gets old. And Mass gets boring. And sin looks a lot more fun than doing good. The rules get tough, faith demands, questions, challenges, pushes, pulls. And we say: “Lord, can I really finish what I started at my baptism? Can I make it all the way to the end? Not sure if I can- help me with your grace to finish this race.” Then the choice comes: forward to the finish, or we quit- and fall away from Church, the faith, discipleship, etc.

The fact is, there is no such thing as being Christian half-way- it’s going to break us. And when it does break us and we have to go forward on pure will alone, it may cost us family, reputation, relationships- everything. “Unless you forsake it all, you cannot be my disciple.” Won’t happen until we hit the breaking point.

Here’s the good news. Marathons, medical school, marriage, celibacy, football seasons- all of these things, precisely because they are all about endurance and committing all the way, have a way of stripping us down to what really matters. They show us what we are made of- what’s at the core of us- the bedrock.

But only if we stay with it. If grad school has been particularly tough, there’s nothing like graduation day. If discipleship has been particularly tough, there is nothing sweeter than heaven.

Discipleship strips us of everything at times and gets us down to the one thing in life that really matters- Jesus. Everything else falls away to nothing as we keep putting one foot in front of the other, especially when it seems like we just can’t do it anymore. We pick up the cross, we renounce the world.

In essence, Christ is telling us this in the Gospel today: If you’re not up for an endurance test, if you’re not willing to be stripped to the core- then discipleship is not for you. But, if you really want redemption, the kind that only comes from hitting the breaking point, then come, and follow me. Not just part of the way- not just to the breaking point- but beyond, and all the way, to the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven.