

I was always a disappointment to my high school basketball coach. He knew that I had ability. My senior year I averaged fourteen points a game. In our eight team conference I was chosen one of the ten all conference choices. But all my coach was disappointed in me. I could have been better. But I did not want to work hard. I just wanted to get by. I guess it really did not matter, it was only a game.

But coaches and teachers and parents often want more for those in their care. Getting by, just doing good enough seems such a waste.

Now I am the one doing the pushing. As pastor now I am the one who does not want any of you to be just getting by. I want you to be growing in every way possible. Growing in love, growing in service, growing in humility, growing in holiness, growing in cheerfulness, growing in courage, growing in faith. So this morning I am ready to use the gospel reading in the way I would use a prod to push you along. Do you think you will like that? I doubt it. Then why do I do it? Maybe because I think God wants me to do it. Or maybe like my coaches I am only interested in prodding you on so that I can have the glory of coaching a winning team.

I have seen those who take the risk of serving others grow. I could name names right in this room. Some of you are on the all city team as far as I can tell, I would even want to nominate some of you for the all state team of serving and compassion. And I have seen those who show up for our weekly practice session here but who choose to sit on the bench or on their sofa most of the week, not grow. Learning the plays is good but everyone needs game experience.

Jesus taught his disciples: Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Sometimes after communion we pray: Almighty God, you gave your son both as a sacrifice for sin and a model of the godly life. Enable us to receive him always with thanksgiving, and to conform our lives to his.

Both the gospel reading and the prayer indicate the life of service was not only for Jesus but for you. Jesus does not want his disciples to sit on the sidelines, simply cheering him on but to serve as he served and gave himself for all.

And if you don't? In a number of parables Jesus speaks of casting people into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing teeth. Until I was on my way to church on a Sunday during my sabbatical about a year ago, I thought of that outer darkness as a place of punishment. But that morning I heard a preacher on the radio talk about gnashing of teeth. He spoke of grinding teeth during sleep, a sign of stress and regret. Weeping and regret – not so much a punishment as a result of a missed opportunity.

I know that I do not want regrets for you and for me. I don't want us saying, we might have...we could have... we should have..... When the reunion is over there is no chance to be reconciled to the brother or sister you have been cut off from. There is no chance to go back and help the injured one I walked right by. Once the master has returned there is no chance to use the talent that lies buried in the ground. No chance to listen when my mind is full of how others are not doing as much as I.

But no matter what opportunities have been lost, today is always a new opportunity with Jesus. Today you can put your hope in him and forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead. Today you can leave behind the old habits and patterns and start fresh with him. Today you can leave behind fear and live in the confidence of faith in him.

For Jesus who loved you more than life itself gives all his own self to you – here - in this cup and in this bread. Take and eat this is my body he says. This is my blood of the new covenant – do not be afraid.