

“Spirituality Isn’t A Show”

Matthew 6 :1-6,16-18

In 1958, there came a new musical on Broadway that went by the title “Damn Yankees.” No, it was not a play about the American Civil War. Rather, it was a play about a middle-aged man’s baseball fantasy and his willingness to sell his soul to the devil in order to play for a major league team, the Washington Senators. The title of the play reveals something about his intense dislike for a certain baseball franchise from the Bronx of New York.

Why do so many people hate the New York Yankees? There are two of us here at St. Peter’s who count ourselves among their fans -- yours truly and Russell Mueller. We also have another member here at St. Peter’s who had a couple of try-outs with the Yankees during his days as a young man playing semi-pro ball here in Wisconsin: Arno Herwig. When I recently heard about that from his daughter, I cornered Mr. Herwig at coffee hour a couple of weeks ago and asked him about the experience!

Among other members of St. Peter’s, baseball allegiances lie with the Milwaukee Brewers, the Chicago Cubs, the Chicago White Sox and....It pains me to say this...the Boston Red Sox! Opening day of the 2008 season is just over a month away believe it or not, which means that the baseball rivalries and teasing in our church will be getting underway as well!

Anyway, back to our story about the Broadway musical “*Damn Yankees.*”

The main character, Joe, is what we call today an average middle-aged couch potato. He sits in front of his television and watches baseball and most of the time his beloved team, the Senators, are defeated by “those damn New York Yankees.”

Joe always wanted to play ball but things just did not work out that way. Marriage, children, and work occupied the life of Joe Hardy.

Thus, one day in frustration he says he would sell his soul to play for the Senators. It just so happens that the devil is listening to Joe and appears quite suddenly in his living room. Satan will make a deal with the middle-aged man. The devil will transform Joe into a young and strong athlete, as he once was, and he can play for the Senators, but when the season is over Joe's soul belongs to him.

After a moment of thought, Joe agrees and he is instantly transformed into a young man again.

Joe manages to get a try-out with the Senators and the manager is quite impressed. Soon Joe is making newspaper headlines as a star and the Senators begin to win games and move up in the standings.

As the season begins to draw to a close, the Yankees and Senators are neck and neck for the pennant and a chance to go to the World Series. Joe has made a great contribution, but in most respects his heart misses his old existence, especially his family and friends at work. He begins to think how he might get out of his pact with the devil.

The whole season comes down to one final game; whoever wins goes to the Series. The last game between the Senators and Yankees comes down to the last inning and ultimately the last out. Joe is playing center field for the home team Senators who are ahead by one run. A crack of the bat sends Joe racing toward the fence. As he runs back Joe is transformed into the middle-aged couch potato he really is.

The devil is upset that Joe has broken his pact and wants to return to his old existence. Now a middle-aged man again, Joe still manages to run back and make the catch, crashing through the center field fence in the process.

He runs for fear that others will discover who he truly is; Joe Hardy was transformed in body but he was not converted in his heart.

Joe Hardy was transformed on the outside but fortunately for him in this case he was never changed on the inside. He was at heart, and always wanted to be, a "couch potato." When he was playing baseball for the Senators the people never saw the real Joe.

That's good if you're doing something so foolish as dealing with the devil -- but that isn't good with regard to the Kingdom of God!

The Gospel text for this evening's service tells us of our need to change on the inside and not concentrate on what others will see. We must be transformed so that God, the one who looks into the heart and understands our every thought, word, and action, will be pleased.

Jesus is very clear in the gospel that we should not practice piety in any form so as to be noticed by others, for our reward will never be found in what others think.

What matters to God is not who we appear to be on the outside -- Mr. Or Ms. Super-Christian....but who we truly are on the inside!

Further, God doesn't really care for our bragging about who we are on the inside. **The first pre-requisite to an authentic Christian life is humility!**

We must understand that while Jesus is clearly presenting a strong message in today's gospel that warns against external practice, he is certainly not downplaying the importance of our traditional Christian practices. It is the attitude that we possess when we participate in these practices that the Lord judges, suggesting that we must look into our hearts and ask the sometimes difficult question, "**What is our motivation for the things we do?**"

The religious people of Jesus' day were making a big show out of their giving of alms -- that's money -- to the poor. That is why Jesus brings the matter up.

A member of the Pharisees would give a few bucks to a beggar alongside of the road, which was good, but the problem was that he wanted everyone else to know about it. *"HELLO? ATTENTION EVERYONE!! I AM GIVING THIS POOR MAN FIVE DOLLARS! LOOK AT ME! ADMIRE ME FOR MY GENEROSITY!"*

And Jesus said that the Pharisee or anyone else who gives money to be seen by others and receive the praise of others, has already received all of the reward that they are going to get. God will certainly not bless them for it. Why? Because God doesn't like bragging.

So Jesus said, *"Look, when you give money, do it with some secrecy. Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. (Verse 3) Be discreet! Then, God who sees in secret, will reward you."* (Verse 4)

Friends, living the Christian life begins with who we are in our hearts. It isn't a game of showing others how spiritual we are.

Just this past Sunday, the weather was so crummy again that I decided to cancel the 10:00 service. The ice on the roads and streets was so bad that the phone was ringing off the hook here. I would answer the telephone and a member would be on the other end: "Are you having services this morning, Reverend?" I would answer that we indeed were. Then the member would say: "Well, you won't see me there. Goodbye."

We did go with an 8:30 service in which I think that there were about twelve of us gathered together. Pam Klotz had called me earlier that morning and asked if I would like for Jeff to come over and put salt and sand on the parking lot, to make it safe for people. Jeff came right over with his rig and did the entire surface of the lot and I felt bad about it afterward, because the turn out on Sunday just wasn't there.

Anyway, right after the 8:30 service people were congratulating me and patting me on the back for braving the roads and driving here to hold worship. They thought that I was valiant in my efforts.

Friends, do you want to know the truth? Do you want to know what it was, really, that motivated me to hydroplane over icy roads in my Ford Escort in order to get here? It's this: Because I knew that the Catholics across the street would still hold Mass and I didn't want to be outdone by them!

I didn't want to be looked upon as a Protestant wimp who was afraid of a little ice! I certainly wasn't going to be outdone by the Catholics!!

Now I ask you: is that a mature rationale for serving in the Kingdom of God? Of course not! Perhaps I too, have some things to learn from what Jesus had to say about this!

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." (Verse 6)

AMEN.