

Now that the football season is off and running, I find myself thinking about the motivational speeches that are often given by coaches. I don't know about you, but sometimes when I'm watching a game, I imagine what might be said to the football players in the locker room during Half-time. Things like, "Nobody who ever gave his best regretted it," which was said by George Halas, a former coach with the Chicago Bears. Or what about Joe Gibbs and his words to the Washington Redskins, "Failures are expected by losers, ignored by winners." And finally, I feel I should quote a football legend from the 1960s, Mr. Vince Lombardi. One fairly rousing saying of his is about giving up: "Winners never quit and quitters never win." Stirring words, for sure, but that doesn't mean they are entirely accurate.

All throughout history, winners have quit one thing and moved on to another. Matthew tells us that Jesus "left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea," where he began his ministry. Simon Peter and Andrew quit fishing and followed Jesus. Saul quit "breathing his threats of persecution and murder against the disciples and followers of the Lord" and became an apostle himself.

And the quitting has continued, right up to the present day. Abraham Lincoln quit being an owner of a general store and entered politics. Julia Childs quit being a CIA intelligence officer and became a world-famous cook. Harrison Ford quit being a professional carpenter when he was offered a part in a little movie called *Star Wars*. "Grandma" Moses quit selling potato chips and began to paint ... at age 80. Clearly, quitters sometimes win, when they discover **the upside of giving up**.

In the parable of the two sons, found in our Gospel this morning, Jesus tells a story to the chief priests and the elders of the people -- a tale of a man with a couple of sons who are needed in his vineyard. This father goes to the first and says, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." The son doesn't want to alter his

plans, so he answers, "I will not." But later he changes his mind; he quits what he is doing, and goes out to work.

The father goes to the second son, makes the same request and the second son answers, "Sure!" In his enthusiastic response, he seems like a real winner. But he fails to go out and work in the vineyard. So, Jesus asks, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" "The first," answer the chief priests and the elders. They grasp that the son who quits what he is doing, and goes out to work in the vineyard, is the real winner. Similarly, when we do the same thing we discover exactly what we need to do, which **is the upside of giving up**. "Truly I tell you," says Jesus to the religious leaders, "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of you."

Now, it isn't too hard for us to imagine the sort of reaction the religious leaders had after hearing those words. "What?" snort the chief priests and the elders. "People like that can't be winners." Apparently, their narrow-mindedness, and their inability to find any sort of compassion for the people that were different from them, or from the individuals society had deemed unworthy, kept their hearts hard and kept them from understanding why Jesus had the authority to do what he was doing.

So, in order to try and bring some clarification to their question about his authority, Jesus continues to explain things for the chief priest and elders. "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him." In other words, these folks, who were losers in the eyes of the religious leaders, were able to see the truth of what John was saying, and they discovered exactly what they needed to do.

I'm fairly certain that many of us can probably think of a number of imperfect and shady individuals in the New Testament who were transformed by their encounters with Jesus to such a degree that they quit what they were doing, or

they turned their life around in one way or another. The Samaritan woman at the well actually dropped her bucket of water, and ran back to her village to tell people about her encounter with the Messiah. Little Zacchaeus wasn't quite so little anymore, in the eyes of the people, after he climbed down from that sycamore tree and welcomed Jesus. As the crowd began to grumble about the Lord being open to the hospitality of such a sinner, the short, tiny tax collector declares, "I will give half my possessions to the poor, I will quit being dishonest and will pay back four times the amount to anyone I have cheated!"

Even Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews was changed by a conversation he had with Jesus. One night as he talks with the Lord about baptism, and what it means to be born from above, he is spiritually transformed. After Christ has been crucified, we observe that the Pharisee had decided to quit being in the dark when he openly goes with Joseph of Arimathea to take the body of Jesus from the cross and prepare it for burial.

And what about the religious leaders? "Even after you saw how the people responded to John's way of righteousness," says Jesus, "you did not change your minds and believe him." The priests and elders were so sure that they were winners, that they did not see the need to quit what they were doing, to change their minds, and believe him. As we witness in today's story, often times it is the quitters, the ones willing to change, who lead the way into the kingdom of God. Ok if that is true, than how can we know when it is time to give up? Here are three hints that it is time to quit:

Hint number one: **Your heart is not in it.** Writing in *The Atlantic* magazine, Noah Berlatsky tells about his son's experience with martial arts. The boy has been doing it for a couple of years and has just graduated to a level where he got to learn how to fight with sticks, which he enjoyed. So Berlatsky was a little surprised

when his son informed him that he would quit at some point. "I'll get bored," he said. "I'll definitely quit eventually."

Berlatsky predicts that he will support his son at that point, because he believes that "quitting is one of the most important life skills you can teach your child." He knows that if "you're going to change your life, if you're going to try something else, you have to be ready to quit whatever it was you were doing before that something else shows up." You know it's time to quit if you discover that you'd be happier without martial arts, or whatever else you are doing at the time. Discovering your true passion is the **upside of giving up**.

Hint number two: **You cannot see the path forward**. When Jesus enters the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the temple come to him as he is teaching and say to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus senses that they are trying to trap him, so he answers their question with a question, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

The priests and elders argue with one another, and discover that they have been trapped. "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they provide Jesus with a non-committal answer, "We do not know." These religious leaders cannot see a good path forward, knowing that they will get in trouble if they attribute the baptism of John to divine or human origin. Being stuck, they should rethink their direction and consider the truth of what Jesus is teaching.

But they do not! Instead of giving up and changing course, they remain stuck on the path they are on, one that will lead them to plot the death of an innocent man. And as for Jesus, he refuses to answer their question about authority because they do not answer his question about authority. They have to quit what

they are doing in order to discover that Jesus does have authority -- authority to teach, to heal, and even to forgive sins.

Hint number three: **You've been avoiding what God wants you to do.** The first son in the parable declines his father's request to work in the vineyard, saying, "I will not." On a spiritual level, we might say that he is avoiding what God wants him to do. But then he drops his resistance, changes his mind and goes out to work in the vineyard. We face the very same challenge, although we don't always receive complete and clear guidance about how to work in God's vineyard.

Fortunately, Christians throughout history have wrestled with the question of what God wants them to do, and a number of techniques have been developed that can help us to discern God's will. Some of the best come from a 16th-century spiritual director named Saint Ignatius Loyola.

Ignatius asks us first to clarify the goal of our life: **To have a loving relationship with God.** With this goal in mind, we can make a number of choices about how we will achieve this goal, and every choice should move us a little closer to God. We might start a business, go back to school, get married, or change jobs. The important thing is to begin with the goal in mind: to follow Christ into an ever deeper and more loving relationship with God.

Once this goal is clarified, **we can tackle the complexities of decision-making.** This is when we figure out how to stop avoiding what God wants us to do, and how to start working in God's vineyard. If you're trying to decide between two activities, list the pros and cons, side by side, on a sheet of paper. Ask some friends what they think. Set aside some time for prayer, talk to God about your decision, and see if you are given greater clarity about your choice. Ignatius believed that "we can discern the right choice by attending to the inner movements of our spirit."

Sometimes, we have to live with a sense of restlessness as God pushes us in a new direction. Other times, we feel peaceful about a decision but then discover that our serenity is really laziness in disguise. Ignatius wants us to continue examining our decisions and make choices that increase the feelings of faith, hope, and love within ourselves.

The upside of giving up is that it puts us in a position **to change our lives for the better**. If we feel that we're avoiding what God wants us to do, we need to stop what we're doing, clarify our goals, and define what it means to have a loving relationship with God. We should figure out what changes need to be made in our lives in order to start using our time and talents as workers in God's vineyard. We ought to pay attention to the inner movements of our spirit, and make choices that will increase our faith, hope, and love! The good news is that by quitting, we might, in fact, be winners. Certainly, it's a win-win when we choose to follow Jesus and move into a more loving relationship with God. And Thanks be to God for that. Amen