

Homily for the Twenty-First Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)  
St. Joseph's Neier August 23-24, 2014  
Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

Central Idea: Power cuts both ways. It can destroy you as a power mad animal or create you into a servant leader.

*I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.*

“My precious.”

I don't know if you all recognize this ugly little guy. No, it is not a small sculpture of your beloved Pastor. This is Gollum, one of the most fascinating and disgusting characters in the Lord of the Rings Trilogy. There is a reason that poor old Gollum, formally known as Smeagal, is so homely, unpleasant and downright hideous. He has been transformed, transformed by the ring.

If you have never heard or seen the trilogy, where have you been for the last fifteen years? The story of the Lord of the Rings is about a certain ring that has been imbued with power, power beyond all telling. It gives to its wearer, invisibility and immortality. It is the one ring that rules them all. The problem with the ring is that the wearer, once they put it on are forever touched by its allure, by its attraction, by its almost demonic pull. Once you have worn it, it becomes the object of desire, of longing, of craving. Once you have worn it, you are forever damned to be under its spell. Gollum used to be good, just like you and me. He was just a simple ordinary little hobbit. And then he came under the spell of the ring. He got a taste of the forbidden fruit of power and it literally drove him mad. If you know anything about the trilogy, spoiler alert, you know that Gollum dies chasing after the ring in a pool of molten lava. Ultimately, his desire destroyed him.

J.R.R. Tolkein, the author, uses the ring as a metaphor for ambition, for power, for authority. Tolkein, a good Catholic I might add, lived through the first and second world wars, and saw the amazing havoc power can wreak. He saw it marching through France, he saw it try to overcome Russia, he saw it exterminate millions. The Lord of the Rings Trilogy is one long study about power, its consequences, its hazards and its menace.

“My precious.”

On Monday, I received two of the three keys to the kingdom. I am not quite like my buddy Gollum here, but I am a bit like Frodo. I am wary of the power, but I am still vulnerable and susceptible to its draw. And even though I have only been in my position

for less than two months, I am already aware of the pitfalls, of the burdens and of the fascination which comes with power. Let's start with the fascination.

Power can be a heady thing. I have already had people sending me stuff about giving them a job. At first, I was like "What is this?" But after the third time or so, it begins to sink in: Oh, yeah, I am going to be in charge of this. Power has a built in charm. It is nothing you do. It is nothing you are. Just by being there, all of a sudden people respect you, people need you, people are willing to go out of their way for you. It can be exhilarating, thrilling and exciting. Then you remember Gollum.

What are the burdens? People need you and they need you NOW. Friday night at the Borgia football game, I was already called upon to deal with two situations. In one instance, a place in the building needed to be accessed. And being Frodo now with the almighty key, I was the one called. The second thing was a couple of younguns were causing a bit of a ruckus with the visiting fans. Not cool at all. I was called in to bust some heads (figuratively speaking of course). We liked being needed and God knows I was born to discipline teens and tweeners, but I have a feeling that this is going to get old really, really quickly.

The pitfalls. Although I doubt I turn into Gollum, eating raw fish (although I like sushi), a good leader always needs to remember that one leads not to wield power, not to lord it over people, but to serve and to serve generously. A leader who forgets that, a leader who makes it all about his or herself, a leader who lets the power change them is not only a danger to the institution they are leading, but they are a danger to their very souls. When people in position of leadership fail in this regard, it is horrible, it is corrosive, it is dangerous, it creates a bitter and resentful atmosphere. The culture becomes toxic. And once that happens, watch out!

In our gospel today, Jesus endows Peter, the Church, and in a sense, all of us within it, the keys to the kingdom. We, in our own ways, are given power and authority, parents over their children, spouses in mutual love over one another, people in their places of employment. We all, in our own ways, carry the ring of power. Unlike Frodo we do not have the mission to toss it into Mount Doom, but instead to wear it and use it. We need to remember that we are only stewards of that power. That power will be passed on to others eventually. We need to remember we are called to serve others with that power. We need to remember how a misuse of this power can transform, change and can mutate one's heart and soul.

Power is precious indeed, but when put into the proper perspective it can give life, it can give hope, it can give joy.

