

Homily for the Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)  
St. Joseph's Neier/Mass and More                      March 1-2, 2014  
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Central Idea: Lent is a time to get our priorities straight, to remember what is most important, most vital in our lives.

*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,  
and all these things will be given you besides.*

He risked his life to save the piano and she held her hurt and her hatred in her heart.

I am reading a fascinating book at the moment called *The Boys in the Boat*. It is a true story about the 8 man rowing team which competed for the gold medal at the Berlin Olympics in 1936. I didn't spoil anything for you, because that is on the cover. The author goes into the backstories of the various crew members. One of them in particular, the one whose life prompted the creation of the book, had an incredibly difficult childhood. He was the second and much later son of his parents, and while he was still quite young, his mother died. His mother loved playing the piano. Even though he was young, he remembers beautiful music filling the home. When he mother died, his father kept and treasured the piano, it was the only item, besides his son, that he kept from his first marriage.

Later on, his much older brother went off and got married. And this is where the story gets a bit weird. His brother's wife had a sister and lo and behold, the sister ends up marrying the father. Yep, you heard that right. The boy's brother is married to the one sister and the boy's father is married to the other sister, even though she was many years younger than him. In essence, the one sister became the other sister's mother-in-law. (it somewhat reminds me of the country song, I am my own Grandpa.) They boy's step-mother played the violin, and would be troubled for the rest of her life by dreams that went unfulfilled. And a large part of her dissatisfaction was caused by the objects of the memories of her husband's dead first wife, the young boy and the piano.

There is so much more to the story, but let me cut to the chase. One night the family, now with two new children, awakens to a horrible scene, their house is on fire. Everyone gets out unharmed. But the father rushes back into the house and is inside for what seems is an eternity. Suddenly, his figure is seen in the doorway. He is pushing the piano, straining with all of his might. After a titanic struggle, he gets it out of harms way and the house burns to the ground. The author then imagines the new wife wondering why on God's green earth he went and risked his life to save it. She knew that the piano was his holding on to his dead wife. She knew she would always be second. And the little boy knew that she knew and he also was aware that her wrath would be targeted on not the piano, but him. Indeed he will be abandoned eventually. Bur at that moment, he knew.

He felt coldness, fear and insecurity. As the author wrote: Home was something you couldn't necessarily count on.

Times like a house fire, that usually expose the truth, usually show you what is most important, most valuable in your life. We can talk all we want about what we think we value, what we think is most vital to us, but when the fire is raging around us and we don't have the luxury of time, what we truly believe, what we truly trust, what we truly value comes to the forefront. One of my greatest fears is that when I am faced with those circumstances, when I am in the fire, if you will, what will my life really be about? Will I be selfless? Will I treasure the things that are eternal? Or will I prove to be afraid, shallow or petty?

Wednesday begins the season of Lent. Lent is always an important time in our spiritual lives, a vital moment in resetting our values. We enter Lent seeking to live out the words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: seek first the Kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you. It is a time where we take a good hard look at our lives, in essence, where we begin to think: when the fire is blazing, what will I treasure?

As I mentioned in the bulletin, our Lenten observance usually focuses on three things: Prayer, Almsgiving and Self-Denial. I exhort each and every one of you to seriously ponder what this Lent will mean for you, especially in these areas.

But more than that, I think the next six weeks can help us focus on allowing the grace of God make us into better husbands and wives, better sons and daughters, better brothers and sisters, better priests, better Catholics, better individuals, a better parish. If you don't think you need Lent, let me say this as bluntly as I can, you need it worst of all. Of late, I have also been reading books about leadership. Every single one of them says the same thing: if you are not moving forwards, you are heading backwards. All of us from nine to ninety need to enter into this season with open eyes, open ears, open hearts.

The book *The Boys in the Boat* uses rowing as a metaphor for life. The pain of a race, the book says, is almost instantaneous, and the winners are the ones who can overcome that pain. As one insightful character says:

*It is hard to make the boat go as fast as you want to. The enemy, of course, is the resistance of the water, as you have to displace the amount of water equal to the weight of men and equipment, but that very water is what supports you and that very enemy is your friend. So is life: the very problems you must overcome also support you and make you stronger in overcoming them.*

This Lent, enter the fire. This Lent, keep rowing.