

Homily for the Third Sunday of Lent (A)
St. Joseph's Neier/SFBRHS (Ring Mass)
Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

March 22-23, 2014

Central Idea: Courage or heart might just possibly be the most important characteristic we can acquire in our lives.

From caring comes courage. -Lao Tzu

It was a cold morning in February 1916 in Everetts, Kansas. Schooling was more demanding back in the day. Children were often assigned chores to get the day going and two brothers, Floyd and Glenn, ages nine and six were assigned with the task of getting the one room schoolhouse warm enough for learning. They walked two miles in the inky pre-dawn darkness from their home to the school. They opened the school and put wood in the pot belly stove to get the room ready for the teacher and the other students. They would take a kerosene can and soak the logs thoroughly. The kerosene accelerated the process of ignition, while also soaking into the logs enough to allow the flames to begin consuming the wood.

But on this frigid February morning, something went wrong. Horribly wrong.

Instead of kerosene, someone had accidentally put gasoline in the can, and so when Floyd and Glenn lit the logs, they felt a percussive whoomp and suddenly the two boys were engulfed in flames. As luck would have it, their older sister was outside and suddenly knew there was trouble. She dragged her brothers out of the fire and ran to get help. By the time she got back, Floyd would be nearly dead and little Glenn would be severely burnt.

Thankfully, Glenn would be unconscious for most of the early part of his ordeal. He awoke to the news that, indeed, Floyd had died, (it crushed him) and the doctors were considering amputating his legs to keep him alive. He protested and begged the doctors not to remove his legs. After many long weeks in the hospital, he would be able to go home. But when all of his bandages were removed, he discovered just how traumatic it was. Glenn had lost all the toes on his left foot, and the transverse arch of the foot was ravaged. The flesh on his knees and shins had been eaten away by the flames. The right leg was grossly misshapen and was now a full two inches shorter than the left leg.

He still could not walk. He would be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Or so it seemed.

Glenn was determined to walk again, and endured an excruciating routine as a necessary evil. One sunny day, during the summer of 1919, his mother wheeled him into the yard

for fresh air, as was her custom. She went back inside. A few minutes later, she was astonished to see Glenn crawling on the ground! She rushed outside, thinking something was wrong. By the time she had reached her son, Glenn had pulled himself across the grass and raised himself up on the picket fence. He then proceeded to drag himself along the fence, stumbling as he tried to *will* his legs into functioning, determined that he would walk, all the while resisting his mother's attempts to help. He did this every day for weeks, until he had worn a path along the fence.

Slowly, his legs started to function and he began to walk. But walking caused him horrible pain. As Glenn himself said: "It hurt like thunder to walk, but it didn't hurt at all when I ran. So for five or six years, about all I did was run."

To make a long story short, that is how Glenn Cunningham, alias the Kansas Flier, the Elkhart Express, became one of the premier mile runners in history. He was a two time Olympic athlete and he won a silver medal in the 1936 Berlin Games in the 1500 meter run. He was a man of amazing endurance...and amazing vision and courage. After his running career was over, he invested wisely and opened up a ranch for trouble children. Over 9000 children were beneficiaries of his charity, and I can only imagine how deeply he inspired them with his incredible life.

As St. Theresa of Avila once said:

To have courage for whatever comes in life - everything lies in that.

It is deeply hidden in them, but the theme of our readings this week is courage. The Israelites need to be encouraged as they find the going tough in the desert. Jesus shows amazing courage as he dares to break nearly every taboo of the Jewish faith, by talking to a Samaritan woman who needs to find life and hope. What we learn today is that practically everyone needs to develop the muscles of courage in their lives, nearly everyone needs someone to inspire and encourage them to look beyond their troubles, beyond their misfortune, beyond their sin, beyond the crushing circumstances of their lives, to discover the ability to run.

Practically everyone I know, like the woman in our gospel, has been burned a bit by life; some, like Glenn Cunningham, in horrible and literal ways. It is when we are confronted by these obstacles that we either prove our mettle and find our courage, or give up and let life run us over. True leaders step up. True leaders march on. True leaders find their strength and their courage, literally, their heart. And all you have to do, as the philosopher Lao Tzu says is to care. From caring comes courage. Glenn Cunningham cared to walk again. Moses cared to bring the people out of slavery. Jesus cared for the Samaritan woman. The real danger in our world comes not from fire, but from apathy, laziness, lethargy and indifference. Without care, without courage, The Kansas Flier would have been grounded, the Elkhart Express would have halted.

How has life burned you? And are you willing to have Jesus, the living water, refresh and renew your heart, so that you may find the courage to lead, to move forward, to soar.

Glenn Cunningham's favorite Scripture passage is from Isaiah, chapter 40, possibly the most hope and encouraging in all of the Hebrew Scriptures:

“But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Today we learn what might be the lesson of life: God cares for us and in that we find the courage to drag ourselves out of our infirmity and dare to run.