

Homily for the Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)
St. Joseph's Neier/SFB Class of 1964 Reunion July 5-6, 2014
Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

Central Idea: We find rest for ourselves when we can let go of past hurts and open ourselves up to the grace of God.

*Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am meek and humble of heart;
and you will find rest for yourselves.*

He woke up in the middle of the night with his hands around his wife's throat, strangling her. That's when they knew he needed help.

If you have not read the book *Unbroken*, you should. The movie comes out at Christmas. It is a story of a real-life American hero. We throw that word about, but Louis Zamperini, who died just this past Wednesday at the age of 97 was truly, a real American hero. So you may be a bit confused by how I started this homily, but when you hear his story, you will understand.

Louis Zamperini was a bit of a miscreant growing up. We would label him ADHD. He liked to fight. He liked to get into trouble. But somewhere along the way he discovered how to focus all of his energy, he focused it into running. He was known at the Torrance Tornado and he competed at the 1936 Berlin Olympics and actually met good old Adolf when he was over there. Like many in his generation, he went off to war and served as a bombardier on a B-24 bomber. In May of 1943, as he and his crew were searching for another downed plane in the Pacific, when their plane had issues (B-24 were famous for that) and they crashed in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Three men survived the crash and thus began a 47 day ordeal, with little food and no water on a flimsy life raft. They could feel the dorsal fins of sharks under the raft. Somehow, somehow, Louis and one other crewmate survived.

Then things took a turn for the worse.

They landed on an island and were immediately captured by the Japanese. For the next two years, Louis Zamperini would be a Prisoner of War and would be the sport of a sadistic guard nicknamed "The Bird." The torture that Zamperini went through, physical as well as psychological, are horrific. "The Bird" was war criminal #7 when the war ended, so you can almost guess how horrible it was.

You don't come back home from all of that without being scarred, without being damaged. Zamperini may have been "unbroken," but he certainly wasn't flourishing. The incident in the middle of the night, strangling his beloved wife, was the final straw. Louis needed help and he needed. It badly.

So how did Zamperini survive, how did he get past the nightmare, how did he move on from the terror? It was God. His wife took him to a Billy Graham revival and he was converted. He knew he had to leave his hatred, he knew he had to leave his bitterness, he knew he had to let go of the lust for revenge. He knew he had to take on a new and lighter yoke, the yoke of forgiveness. And, miracle of miracles, he did.

Zamperini traveled to Japan and met with some of his former guards and he embraced them, forgave them. It is almost too unbelievable to be true, but it is. Mr. Zamperini forgave his tormentors and enjoyed a successful career running a center for troubled youth. He even reached out to The Bird. "As a result of my prisoner of war experience under your unwarranted and unreasonable punishment," Mr. Zamperini wrote his former guard in the 1990s, "my post-war life became a nightmare ... but thanks to a confrontation with God ... I committed my life to Christ. Love replaced the hate I had for you." A third party promised to deliver the letter to The Bird, living peacefully now as Mr. Watanabe. He never replied.

If Louis Zamperini, a man who went through unimaginable things, could find it in his heart to forgive, what about us? In our gospel, Jesus promises us a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light. Louis discovered that yoke of reconciliation, that burden of love. He discovered that holding on to the bitterness, holding on to the hate, holding on to the hurt would only drive him down, would only break him. Instead, he chose the way of love and that made all the difference. The sharks of his hostility and resentment circled his heart, but he refused to give in, he refused to be consumed by them.

For his 81st birthday in January 1998, Zamperini ran a leg in the Olympic Torch relay for the Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan. While there, he attempted to meet with his chief and most brutal tormentor during the war, who had evaded prosecution as a war criminal, but the latter refused to see him. The Bird died in 2003.

Zamperini meanwhile will live on in infamy as a soul who refused to give in, to the incredibly horrific things that happened to him, to his tormentors, to acid of enmity.

Godspeed Louis Zamperini as you make your final race, as you take your flight to haven. You did ultimately find rest for yourself.