

Timothy J. Grassi

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) 2020

Baseball great, Ty Cobb, played 3,033 games and for twelve years led the American League in batting averages. For four years he averaged over 400. However, his spiritual life had not kept pace with his sporting career. Converted to Christ while near death on 17 July 1961, he said, “You tell the boys I’m sorry it was the last part of the ninth (inning) that I came to know Christ. I wish it had taken place in the first half of the first (inning).” If there is a lesson to be learned from Cobb’s experience, perhaps it could be expressed as follows: As long as a person draws breath, it’s never too late to change course; it’s never too late to shift one’s center of gravity; it’s never too late to exercise the prerogative of changing one’s mind. This is precisely what the prophet Ezekiel was saying in our first reading: “since he has turned away from all the sins he has committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die.” Conversion to Christ and His ways, IS LIFE. People who are living lives that are in line with Christ have a certain joy about them; a certain sparkle in their eyes. Being right with God is being very alive. This is what Ty Cobb experienced at the end of his life. In a sense, perhaps Ty Cobb understood what Jesus said in the Gospel, but only at the end of his life, “Amen I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you.” Why would Jesus say this? Well, He goes on to talk about St. John the

Baptist and His point is that St. John the Baptist had shown the way to holiness by proclaiming the imminence of the Kingdom of God and by preaching conversion. The scribes and Pharisees would not believe him, yet they boasted of their faithfulness to God's teaching. They were like the son who says "I will go," and then does not go; the tax collectors and prostitutes who repented and corrected the course of their lives will enter the Kingdom before them. They are like the other son who says "I will NOT go," but sees the error of his ways and goes. The point is that our Lord is stressing that penance and conversion can set people on the road to holiness even if they have been living apart from God for a long time. I believe that we all have encounters with JC that can change the course of our lives, which is what conversion is. The real question is how do we respond to those encounters with Christ if we pause to recognize them when they happen. It's in this recognition that we find everything we need to be happy. And, this gets to the heart of what St. Paul said to the Phillippians in our second reading when he speaks of Christ, "Who though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped... He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Once a person comes to the reality of what Christ has done; the humility He has shown, then we become capable of leaving behind our past and grasping the ways of Christ. That's what the first son did in the Gospel. He said NO, but then converted and went. He saw the error of

his ways and changed. But, we must not think of conversion as a one time event. Conversion is a process; it is an ongoing journey that will end only when we die. The first step in the journey is to have a radical dissatisfaction with our present life. The second step is to respond; to have some spark that lights the fire under us and triggers us to do something about our life. Finally we have to make the all important first move in the direction of a new life. Perhaps a good way to begin is to ask yourself some probing questions like, “Are you dissatisfied with your present relationship with God?” “Do you desire a deeper personal relationship with Jesus?” “Do you want to love your family and neighbor more as Jesus loves them?” Today’s readings could be the “trigger” or “spark” you’re looking for to do something about these things. Maybe the all important first move is to make a good confession. Maybe it’s to begin to spend more time in prayer. Maybe it’s to take some vice that you have and make a conscious decision to change. For example, instead of always growling like a dog, decide to purr like a cat. Instead of impatiently reacting in anger, decide to keep silent and endure. Instead of speaking negatively about everything, decide to find at least one positive thing to say. The main thing to remember is that there is only one person that you can convert and that is yourself, but are you willing to do so? Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Theologian said, “There is no such thing as being a Christian; there is only

becoming a Christian.” What that means to me is that if we’re not becoming a Christian, we’re really, NOT, much of a Christian at all!