

August 18, 2024

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 15

Sermon: Into every life...

The last four times this reading came up in the lectionary, I have always explored the passage from 1 Kings in which Solomon follows in his father's footsteps and becomes king of both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Each time, I have focused on essentially the same message, about following your dreams. This time, as Norman Jewison remarked at my graduation from Emmanuel College, I feel sort of like Elizabeth Taylor on the night of her second wedding to Richard Burton – I know what to do, I'm just not sure how to make it fresh.

And then something niggled at me to look a second and even a third time at the Ephesians passage. Whomever said the Bible was easy has obviously never read it. I didn't like this passage, or at least the part of it that kept drawing me back - giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything. I don't know about you, but there have been circumstances in my life that I'm not really thankful for at the time. And, I've been a minister long enough to trust the leading of the Holy Spirit, because that is, no doubt, the source of the niggling. Obviously at least one of us needs to hear this message.

I was looking at the list of Canadian Paralympians who are headed for the Paralympic Games in Paris. I was fascinated by the stories of the wheelchair athletes – basketball, rugby, tennis. I looked at six different athletes' bios. Four were injured in vehicle collisions, one in a construction accident, and one was born with spinal abnormalities. I picked one at random, okay, he was the first, alphabetically speaking, and I want to read you some excerpts of Patrick

Anderson's story. Patrick is on the Canadian Wheelchair Basketball Team. This is his sixth Paralympic Games, and Patrick is the ripe old age of 44.

"I was born in Edmonton but moved to Fergus, Ontario when I was three. Fergus was a small town of maybe 10,000 people when I was growing up, and I'm one of seven kids in the family, so we were very much free-range kids: outside all day, be back home by supper kind of thing. So we had a lot of freedom to bike, run around, and climb trees. It was a lovely place to grow up. I'm the fifth among my siblings – the last born in Edmonton. I was the original baby in the family, so I developed some of those personality traits as the baby of the family, but then along came my brother and sister a few years later. With seven of us, something was always going on, someone to play with and hang out with. I had two older brothers, two and four years older than me, so I always hung with them, tracked with them, and played sports. It got a little feisty. I'm sure if we played more sports as teenagers, it would've gotten more competitive, but more on that later.

In the winter, the sport was hockey, ball hockey, road hockey and in the summertime, we played a lot of baseball. I played organized hockey from the age of five to nine. Like probably half the kids in my class, I thought I could one day play in the NHL, but at the same time, I never really had that dream. It didn't seem like a realistic dream for someone from our town. It didn't seem like a realistic path, but we were all obsessed with being great hockey players – trying to be Wayne Gretzky.

I was an Oilers fan – I envisioned myself as Mark Messier flying down the left wing with a pretty nice snapshot. Growing up in the 80s, even though we were in

Ontario, I remember watching a lot of first periods of Oilers games, falling asleep and getting carried to my bed.

A few days before my tenth birthday, I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. I got hit by a car and was saved by the paramedics that got there. This woman, who happened to be steps away when the accident happened, came and held my hand and stayed with me until the paramedics arrived. They rushed me to the local hospital in Fergus and then to SickKids Hospital in Toronto. I woke up a few days later with no legs.

Following the accident, it was a year of healing and a total loss of independence. I was sitting in a hospital chair with somebody pushing me around all the time. It was very slow to get back my strength and independence. It was a year before I got my own chair, it wasn't a sport chair, but it was a huge leap forward from the hospital chair.

A year after my accident, I was invited to a wheelchair sports camp in the Kitchener-Waterloo area run by the Twin City Spinners. I was introduced to a few different activities and sports. I spent some time in the pool, then on the track, but really, we were there to play basketball.

A couple of the guys at the camp were on Canada's 1988 Paralympic team that went to Korea. Right off the bat hearing stories about playing for Team Canada planted the seed in my imagination. I was sort of hooked from that first weekend. At the same time, I had a long way to go. At the time, if I heaved the ball with two hands as hard as possible, I could just barely clear the front of the rim, but it was on my radar.

My attention started to shift away from hockey and towards Michael Jordan and the NBA. This was the early 90s, Jordan's first title – I caught that wave like millions of other people around the world and became obsessed with basketball and the NBA, and that sort of fed my passion for wheelchair basketball.

I was introduced to wheelchair basketball in 1991 and made the Junior National team in 1997. From 11 to 17, I accelerated fairly quickly, partly because there weren't as many junior opportunities. I had to jump in with the adults from a young age. I had to jump in with the adults when I was 13 or 14, which accelerated my development.

At the same time, I was sort of ready for it. I was tall and long and athletic and could keep up. I had a lot to learn, of course. I had to get stronger and tougher. Playing against adults and able-bodied athletes helped my development. There were a few junior opportunities and then there was the chance to jump in with the adults and they both helped my growth. One challenged me more physically; the other one taught me to take responsibility and to be a leader.

As a teenager, I got to go down to the States and play against some of the greats. I had my eyes on them from an early age: who were the best players, what's their story, what can they do. I used to seek them out at tournaments and watch and play. Right away, I was paying attention. I wanted to know who the guys were that I was supposed to watch, and I'd watch them.

One touch point for me was Canada Games in 1995 because that was maybe the first time I played with and against all the best players in my generation and

older such as Joey Johnson, Jamie Borisoff, and Richard Peter, who would go on to play on the National Team. I was only 15 at the time, and some athletes were already 25, so I was a boy amongst men, and I held my own. That's when I realized both that I had it and I also realized what a good position Canada was in going forward – how much talent there was around the country.

I think 1997 was that big pivotal year for me because we won World Juniors; I started college at Illinois with Mike Frogley, and that spring, I also made the Senior Men's National Team for the first time.

When I made the National Team for the first time in 97, I was somewhat surprised. It happened slightly faster than I thought it would. But looking back on it, there was turnover; there was a new wave coming through. It was Frog's first go around as National Team coach, so we were moving forward with a new generation of players, and I was part of that.

I had the choice of a couple of colleges. I just wanted to go to a big school with a rich history in wheelchair basketball and disability advocacy – it felt like being a part of a really important legacy. Frog sat me down and sort of explained to me the different opportunities that I had like an impartial recruiter and I ended up picking Illinois without knowing he was moving there to coach as well.

My first year at Illinois ended up being his first year at Illinois, and it was also his first year as coach of the National Team, so it was the start of a new era with the National Team.

Illinois was awesome. It's something I encourage athletes to consider. Those four or five years you get to spend on campus has its own sort of arc: beginning, middle and end that can set a great foundation for the rest of your life in the sport, whatever that happens to be. It was a really special time.

The 2000 team in Sydney was the most fun team on and off the court that I've ever been a part of – it was just a crazy cast of characters. Everyone was firing on all cylinders. I remember being underneath the stadium warming up before the gold medal game and feeling the stadium shake while the bronze medal game was going on.

I remember coming onto the court, being too jazzed up, and flying around like a chicken with my head cut off. The Netherlands got up on us 6-0 right off the bat, and then Joey wrestled it back, got us on better footing and then I had a better game from there.

Giving back to the game and being an ambassador for the game is what has motivated me for the past 10 years. Before that, I wore it heavily; it felt like a burden I didn't want. In the last 10 years, it's been more of a fun motivating factor, and that's manifested itself in a few ways.

I want to compete hard because I know that in the past, people have wanted to come through Canada, wanted to go through me and measure themselves against us and me. So I take that challenge seriously as a sort of responsibility. Not just, 'Oh we got ours, it's your turn now'. No, make them come get it. When I was younger, I wanted to go up against the guys ahead of me and the legends – I wanted them to take me seriously.

I was lucky to have tried many different things and found what works for me. That feeling you get when you feel at one with your chair is so special. I don't think you can get fast-track that. It comes with time."

Any one of these wheelchair athletes, whether they were born with some disability or whether they were injured somehow, any one of them could be forgiven for allowing themselves to become depressed and giving up on life. Yet, they all demonstrate a zest for life and a competitive spirit. They are all grateful to be alive and to be able to compete in sport and in life.

The piece of scripture that spoke to me - give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything. How many of us, when something doesn't work out the way we want it to, get discouraged, or seek to put the blame on someone other than ourselves, or get angry, maybe even angry at God? I don't believe that God visits hardships on us, but I do believe that God works to make joy the final outcome, if we don't give up.

Patrick's story speaks to me of not giving up, and of being grateful for every day, even when life changed forever for him just before his tenth birthday. Patrick's indomitable spirit speaks of giving thanks at all times and for all things. May we learn that lesson from Patrick and our other Paralympians.