

Wow-any baseball fans out there today? I am thinking it is sure great this weekend to have Chicago major league baseball back. Our family includes both north and south side fans so this is a happy day despite the continuingly serious coronavirus pandemic here for which we always pray for relief. Well, in our family, even in this pandemic we've enjoyed all Chicago sports- over many years, actually, been big fans of club, high school, college and pro sports across the state.

Basketball is especially important: my dad was a high school varsity basketball coach for 15 years, right here in Lake County, my son in law is a high school varsity basketball coach, my boys played basketball from the time they were tiny, through high school. And my 19 month old grandson, very clearly and proudly said "basketball" as one of his very first words.

As Chicago sports fans, we've also enjoyed the Chicago Bulls NBA basketball team for decades. Like so many folks, perhaps including you, we were absolutely astounded in the 1990's by the Bulls' amazing six year championship reign under the leadership of coach Phil Jackson and definitely under head player #23, Michael Jordan.

Lately, I've caught some fascinating episodes of the brand new, "The Last Dance" documentary about Michael and the Bulls during that time. Have you seen "The Last Dance"? It's a very well done piece.

I've certainly enjoyed experiencing again all the players' and particularly Mr. Jordan's awe inspiring, truly gifted athleticism, his unique sportsman's ability to adapt and evolve his game, of course his perfection of the slam dunk, his 5 time MVP and 14 time NBA All star designations, all of which prompt Michael Jordan to be named by many experts across the world as the greatest player of all time.

Yet...yet...it's also been quite disconcerting and disappointing for me to watch in the film and hear from his Bulls' teammates about Michael's often cruel and frankly abusive behavior toward them-his punching, bullying, holding terrible grudges, shunning them, screaming at them, even demanding meals be withheld from them: all in Michael's leadership efforts to motivate the Bulls to victory.

Nasty or not, that was Michael Jordan's leadership style and one which he seemingly supports to this day. In a particularly poignant scene in "The Last Dance" documentary, when confronted about these incidents, years later, Michael very emotionally, even tearfully, but firmly reiterates, and I quote: "I wanted to win; I wanted them to win. That's how I played the game-it is who I am. I want to win."

Yes, they won, won, own. But, those championships were acquired, through, what I would suggest, was an environment of ugly fear and intimidation, which Michael Jordan perpetuated and definitely by the coaches and players was allowed to express and lead.

The greatest player, he was, yes, probably, arguably. But was he a great leader?

What do Michael's recently revealed actions toward his teammates reveal about him?

And, how do they shape his leadership legacy?

This morning, I would like you to think about what leadership means to you—definitely as a believer in Jesus, and especially in the context of our church. Because, sometime quite soon we'll start the process of discerning and praying about what kind of leadership we desire from our next permanent, called pastor here at All Saints. And, just like sports' team's coaches and leaders, ministers are very different people and possess quite varied leadership styles and visions. Through God's Holy Spirit, we have to consider who is the right fit for us. No pastors are perfect, believe me; while hopefully, full of faith for the Lord, we are all human people with definite gifts as well as liabilities as leaders.

Now, about 3000 years ago, a leader emerged in society whom Biblical tradition still maintains was the greatest leader—the best sovereign—Israel has ever known: *“All the kings of the earth”* at one time *“sought his wisdom”* from God, Scripture says in 2 Chronicles, chapter 9, verse 23. This wise leader was King Solomon, son of King David and his wife, Bathsheba. For 40 years, from the time he was 15 years old, Solomon strove to bring wisdom, peace and prosperity to his kingdom.

In our first reading today from 1 Kings, a very young King Solomon, at the beginning of his reign, he says here in verse 7, *“I am only a little child”*—requests God's help in leading God's chosen people.

Do you hear today how Solomon asks the Lord for discernment—for understanding governance, the Bible says in verse 9 and specifically, Solomon requests, to learn the difference between *“good and evil”*. To do *“right”*, as God replies happily to Solomon in verse 11, is clearly a leadership priority at this time, for this teenage ruler. And one which the Lord supports, Scripture reports today in verse 10 as we read: *“It pleased the Lord that Solomon asked this.”*

To do right. To choose with God's help between what is good and what is evil when making decisions on behalf of other people. That, Scripture shows today, is how one leads with the Lord. God give us his gracious free will. And, to choose His good is always best, even if it's not the easiest, or most profitable.

Jesus, God's Son, our Savior and Lord, addresses this critical leadership and life choice making in our Gospel Reading for today. He explains His parable of the separation of the good and bad fish as representing how those folks who are *“righteous”*—or good—will be saved forever by God's angels; it says that right here in the Bible today, Matthew, Chapter 13: 49.

Jesus here also reveals today that His same angels-messengers of God-will definitely punish for a fiery, violent eternity those who choose evil in this world. Those who deliberately decide against Christ's good, loving kingdom for all people- will definitely be sent by God to a indescribably horrific place "*where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*", as Christ vividly warns us today in verse 50. I read a similar scenario described some years ago in a somewhat controversial autobiography of a man named Howard Storm. For 20 years, Mr. Storm was a professor at Northern Kentucky University. He was an atheist with a self-described obnoxious, arrogant, aggressive, fear-inducing personality to his students, colleagues and family.

Until, Howard experienced a powerful, transformational out of body experience as he lay near death from perforated bowel complications while on a tour of Paris with a group of students and his wife. Mr. Storm describes floating above his body, not being able to communicate with his sobbing spouse, and then being led out of his hospital room by pale humanoid creatures that urged him down a long, ever darkening hallway, saying that they had been waiting for him forever. Storm remembers how the creatures then became increasingly hostile to him, as he grew frightened and refused to continue following them. They swore at him, using horrifying, pornographic language against God and him and his family. Then, he says, these things, whom he realized were demons, physically attacked him; they bit him with vile, sharp, fanglike teeth; they scratched and then started to viciously dismember him with gigantic clawlike fingernails, all the while screaming blaspheming obscenities at him and at God. This seemed to go on forever. But, then, through all that pain, and evil and violence, and the deep darkness, Howard Storm says he clearly heard a voice-a strong, sure voice-

Which I am positive, friends, was God's Holy Spirit, "*interceding*" for Howard in his "*weakness*" there, as the Spirit is described doing today in our 2nd reading for all of us in our terrible times! This miraculous Holy Spirit voice urged Mr. Storm to "pray to God, to pray to Jesus, pray, pray" and so, desperately searching his memory for anything he knew about our Creator, Howard starting reciting just bits and fragments of Bible verses he learned 40 years before in his Lutheran Sunday School class, to which his mom had made him attend, against the wishes of his angry, abusive, alcoholic, atheist father.

Mr. Storm noticed then, with mention of the word "God," or "Jesus" the demonic creatures would retract, retract, and eventually, as he prayed to Christ, over and over, he was left alone again. Still, he called out, crying, for Jesus to save him, forever, and then, suddenly Howard Storm was picked up, his wounds tended, his heart healed forever by the Savior to whom he then committed the rest of his life. Jesus gave Howard a kind of life review, where he was somehow shown scenes where he was reminded of some good, but also the many bad, unkind and cruel choices Howard had made in life that had hurt himself, his family and others.

While Jesus affirmed he loved Howard, he told him when he recovered he must do better as one of His beloved children. And, be a witness for God in the world. Transformed by Jesus that day as a husband, father, professor and person, Howard Storm changed the way he led his life, his students and his family. He now puts God and what God wants first, no matter what the cost.

As King Solomon's father, David pleaded with the Lord in today's Psalm, verse 133, "*Order my footsteps in Your word; let no iniquity have dominion over me*"...

I've really been impressed for the last few years with the choices for God's good and not iniquity which a famous, leading basketball player makes. Though he is sadly not a Chicago athlete, Steph Curry, the 6 time NBA All-Star, 2 time MVP and 3 time NBA championship point guard for the Golden State Warriors, and who has been described as the "Michael Jordan of the three point era" says this about his faith, which he calls his "driving force": Curry proclaims, "Each game is an opportunity to be...a witness for Christ. When I step on the floor, people should know who I represent, who I believe in...my Lord and Savior. There's more to me than just the jersey I wear: and that's Christ living inside of me".

Now, when Steph Curry was in high school, he was a very talented varsity basketball player, but at just six feet tall and 160 pounds, he was not the size that many major basketball schools scouted and accepted. So, Curry was thrilled to be recruited by Davidson College, a Division 1 school in his home state of North Carolina. Just before his first practice there as a freshman, Steph received a text from his mom: "Stay faithful and work hard", she wrote to her nervous son, who had recently given his life to Christ. And, then, his caring mom included in that text her favorite Bible verse, Romans 8:28, which Steph continues to this day to write on his shoe. This Scripture is part of our 2nd reading here in church today: "*And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose.*"

Sometime in the near future, we will call a new pastor here to All Saints Lutheran Church. I encourage all of us to start right now praying for that person, wherever he or she may be. Let's pray for her or his discernment as they lead us! Let's pray our new pastor will choose to make good and right decisions! And, like Steph Curry, who every time he makes a three pointer donates 3 nets to the United Nations Foundation's Nothing but Nets campaign, and who regularly gives supplies to the non profit East Oakland Development Center for underprivileged kids, let's pray our minister to come is an inspirational team leader grounded in our Lord God, Jesus Christ!

Let's pray this pastor will share her or his faith as readily as Steph Curry, champion basketball player who who commented recently, crediting the Holy Spirit presence in his life, "It's not about getting any of the glory for yourself-it's all for God. That's where you have to keep perspective. You work at it... **And you do it all for His will.**"

And, that's Good News.

Amen.