

ADVENT 3C – 12/16/18

We Are All Family

(Luke 3:7-18)

I have a confession to make. I can't keep it a secret any longer. I can't deny it. It's simply this... I'm a sucker for inspirational movies about football. I think it must have started long ago with *Brian's Song*, that made for TV tear-jerker about the Chicago Bears' teammates and fellow running backs, Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo – who tragically died of cancer. Even all these many years later, whenever I hear the theme music from *Brian's Song*, I'm immediately reduced to tears.

Then there's that last scene in *Rudy*, the film about the most unlikely athlete to ever play football for Notre Dame. You know the one, where he finally gets his first playing time in the last few seconds of the very last game of his senior season – and ends up sacking the Georgia Tech quarterback? Forget about it!

In that movie there's the scene, you may recall, where the Charles Dutton character says to Rudy, who is threatening to quit and pack it in just before that final game: "You're 5 foot nothin', and a hundred and nothin' (you see, Rudy was just 5'6" and 165 pounds) and you have barely a speck of athletic ability. And you hung in there with the best college football players in the land for two years. And you're gonna walk outta here with a degree from the University of Notre Dame. In this life, you don't have to prove nothin' to nobody except yourself. And after what you've gone through, if you haven't done that by now, it ain't never gonna happen. Now go on back." (Man, I... I just get misty-eyed every time I watch that scene!)

It reminds me of a coach I once had who *tried* to be inspirational but it didn't quite work out that way, when he said to us, "Fellows, you may be small... but you're slow, too!" Somehow, that one didn't quite work.

The truth be told, whenever I watch *Rudy*, I'm reduced to a bawling, slobbering mess. If you ask me, I'd have to give it "five Kleenexes"

And then, of course, there's *Remember The Titans*. The star linebacker, who was paralyzed in an automobile accident, is forced to watch from his hospital bed as his teammates play without him in the Virginia state championship game which goes down to the wire – with his team scoring on the very last play to win...

A few years ago, however, this one dropped down considerably on my list. One of my parishioners down in Georgia actually met Bill Yoast (who was the white coach who was demoted when the two schools were combined on account of integration) and even bought Coach Yoast's book which he then shared with me and I read. It turns out that Gerry Bertier, that star linebacker, *was* actually paralyzed from a car accident – but it was several years *after* he left high school. And the championship game that went down to the wire, with T.C. Williams High School winning on the very last play after trailing 7-3? It turns out that T.C. Williams won that championship game in a blowout; something like 56-0. But both of these facts were conveniently changed in the movie for "dramatic-effect," I'm sure. So while it's still a great movie, it just doesn't rank as high as it used to, in *my* book at least.

Which brings me to *The Blind Side*; the story of Michael Oher who played his college ball at the University of Mississippi and then was drafted in the first round by the Baltimore Ravens in 2009. For those of you unfamiliar with the football term, "blind side" is used to describe the area *behind* a quarterback when he drops back to pass. If he's a right-handed thrower (as most quarterbacks are) it's the left side of the formation which then leaves the left *tackle*, in particular, protecting the quarterback's "blind side," or again simply the area that he can't see.

The movie, as I said, is about Michael Oher who was a homeless teen living in Memphis, Tennessee, and who was drifting through life and barely making it through school when he was more or less adopted by

Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohey, a well-to-do white couple, and then raised along with their two children as if he was one of their own. Under their care and nurturing, Michael then evolved into one of the top high school football prospects in the entire country, eventually earning a scholarship to the University of Mississippi where he became an All-American, before being drafted in the first round, as I previously noted, by the Ravens.

For me, it's another "five Kleenexes," maybe even more. In particular, there was a scene where Sandra Bullock, who plays Leigh Anne Tuohey, is taking "Big Mike" out clothes-shopping because, well... he doesn't really have any. And they end up at a Big and Tall Men's Shop in one of the poorest neighborhoods, not only in Memphis, but in the entire *country* as well. And Leigh Anne says, "I've lived here my whole life and I've never been to this area." And Big Mike, who stands 6'5" and weighed about 350 pounds even in high school says to her, "Don't worry. I got your back."

"Don't worry. I got your back." Later, when this gentle giant is having problems on the field protecting his quarterback's blind side because he's just not mean and aggressive enough, Sandra Bullock's character stomps onto the field – completely disrupting practice – grabs Michael's face mask and says to him, "Michael... Tony here is your quarterback. You protect his blind side... When you see him, you see me... This is you family, Michael. You have to protect them..."

And with that, something clicks for Michael and he now understands. And it unleashes all the power and fury in this 6'5" 350 pound giant of a man-child. For someone who never knew his father, whose mother was addicted to drugs and whose siblings, like Mike himself, basically ended up out on their own, living on the streets, this was the very *first* family that he had ever known in his life. And it made all the difference in the world. And, needless to say, it then made all the difference for him as a football player as well.

Well, what does this have to do with today's scriptures, you must be asking yourselves? And I guess the short answer is: Today's gospel is a reminder that we are *all* family, and because we *are* family, it's our job to watch each other's back and to protect each other's "blind side."

That's the short answer. Now here's why I think it's true. We first met John the Baptist last week doing his thing out there in the desert; in particular calling on people to repent, or (in other words) to "turn back" to God.

This week, then, we learn that "crowds" are actually flocking out to *hear* John preach and to be baptized by him as well. And John greets them with those welcoming words, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Not exactly a graduate of the Dale Carnegie course: "How to Win Friends and Influence People" was he?

Now John was preaching here to a *mixed* audience. That is to say, in those crowds who flocked to see him there were both the "religious" people of that day, the Pharisees and Sadducees and such; the well-to-do, well-respected people of society. But also the poor and the "outcasts" as well; including tax collectors and even soldiers.

And to the first group – the well-respected, religious people – John says, "Don't even *begin* to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" In other words, as if that will somehow protect you. Don't even begin to think that you have some kind of "privileged status" here. Because you're no better than anybody else. "Even now," he says, "the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

For John, the bottom line is pretty simple and straight forward: "Bear fruits *worthy* of repentance." That is, we're talking about *actions* here, he says, not just words.

So, naturally, the people begin to ask him, "What then should we do." And for John, again, it's really quite simple. Share. If you've got two

coats, share with the one who has none. And whoever has food, go and do likewise...

The life-changing difference and the determining factor in Michael Oher's transformation from homeless teen to first-round NFL draft pick was the willingness of that well-to-do white couple to take him under their wings like he was one of their own; to clothe and feed and shelter him, and provide for his education so that he could then make something of himself with his life. They, in effect, protected *his* blind side and watched *his* back. And then later Michael, of course, did the very same thing on a professional football field...

Now the respectable, well-to-do folks that we know were out there in the desert with John get kind of quiet at this point. Instead, it's the despised tax collectors who speak out; men who were looked down upon as collaborators and cheats. But they, too, want to be baptized, we're told. And John doesn't even miss a beat. He turns to them, these people who are despised and looked down on and says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

The point here is that not only does John answer their question, but in the very *act* of answering it he lets them know that they, too, have a place in God's kingdom. In other words, his message of repentance and bearing fruit *worthy* of that repentance is for *everybody*, including them.

Encouraged, no doubt, by what they have just heard, the soldiers speak up next, "And we, what should *we* do? And John says to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations and be satisfied with your wages." In short, don't bully.

In fact, David Lose boils down John's entire message here *this* way: "Share... Be fair... Don't bully."

"This feels more like the stuff of kindergarten than the Apocalypse," writes Lose. "Which may be Luke's point. Fidelity does not have to be

heroic,” he says. “There are opportunities to do God’s will, to be God’s people, all around us. These opportunities are shaped by our context: the roles in which we find ourselves and the needs of the neighbor with which we are confronted. But make no mistake, opportunities abound. John may have come from the wilderness, but the crowds – and *we* – live in the towns, villages, and marketplace, and these, too, can be places of testing and the arenas in which we offer our fidelity to God through service to our neighbor.”

In other words, it’s actually quite simple. You want to be God’s people? To share in God’s Kingdom? Then do God’s will. Watch each other’s back and protect each other’s blind side.

Sometimes I think of it like a “good cop, bad cop” routine. You know, how the police on TV cop shows tag-team to interrogate a witness or potential suspect? Jesus and John the Baptist are kind of like that; Jesus, the good cop, and John, the bad cop. But their message and purpose is exactly the same: to help people understand that we love God and participate in his kingdom when we love our neighbor as ourselves, when we watch our neighbor’s back and protect his blind side.

“There are a lot of coaches with good ball clubs,” the Green Bay Packer legendary coach Vince Lombardi once said, “who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline, but still don’t win the game. Then you come to the third ingredient: if you’re going to play together as a team, you’ve got to *care* for one another. You’ve got to love each other. Each player has to be thinking about the next guy and saying to himself: “If I don’t block that man, Paul (a reference to running back Paul Hornung) is going to get his legs broken. I have to do *my* job well in order that he can do *his*... The difference between mediocrity and greatness,” Lombardi said that night, “is the feeling these guys have for one another.”

Well, it’s the same way for us. In a healthy church, each Christian learns to care for others. That’s what John preached. And that’s what

Jesus taught as well. To “love one another.” And to express that love in visible, tangible ways.

And not just love *each other*, either. Notice that John doesn’t make any distinctions in today’s gospel. If *anyone* is without a coat or food, he says, then share *yours* with them. Be fair to *everyone*. Bully *no one*. Not just the so-called “good people,” or “religious people.”

A Roman Catholic bishop, who had begun a hostel for AIDS victims, was once asked why money was being spent to care for such people, many of whom were not even Christian, much less Catholic. And he responded, “We do not help suffering and oppressed people because they are Christian... but because *we are*.”

“Share... Be fair... Don’t bully,” said John. Jesus would only reaffirm those words. He was once asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” And Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Or, in the words of Michael Oher, “Don’t worry. I got your back.” Our neighbor, said Jesus, is *also* part of our family. You are to protect his blind side. When you see him, said Jesus, you see *me*. You have to protect him...

Peter Arnett, the one-time CNN television commentator and reporter, was once in Israel, in a small town on the West Bank, when an explosion went off. Bodies were flying everywhere. All around him there were signs of death and destruction. The screams of the wounded seemed to be coming from every direction.

A man came running up to Arnett holding a bloodied little girl in his arms. He pleaded, “Mister, I can’t get her to a hospital. The Israeli troops have sealed off the area. No one can get in or out. But you’re the

press. You can get through. Please, mister! Help me get her to a hospital. Please! If you don't help me, she's going to die."

So Peter put them in his car, got through the sealed area, and rushed to the hospital in Jerusalem. The whole time he was hurtling down the road to the city, the man was pleading from the back seat, calling out to him, "Can you go faster, mister? Can you go faster? I'm losing her... I'm losing her."

When they finally got to the hospital, the girl was rushed to the operating room. Then the two men retreated to the waiting area and slumped down on a bench. They just sat there in silence, too exhausted to even talk.

After a short while, they stood as the doctor came out of the operating room. He said to them sadly, "She's dead." The man then collapsed in tears, and as Peter put his arms around the man to comfort him, he said, "I don't know what to say. I can't imagine what you must be going through. I've never lost a child."

And the man looked up at Peter with a startled expression on his face. "Oh, mister, you misunderstand. That Palestinian girl was not my daughter. I am an Israeli settler. That Palestinian was not my child. But mister... there comes a time when each of us must realize that *every* child, regardless of that child's background, is a daughter or a son. There must come a time when we must realize that we are *all* family."

That's what John the Baptist was saying in his blunt, no-holds-barred way. And that's what Jesus came to preach and to teach as well. God's kingdom is not about who you are descended from, or what church you belong to, or how religious you think you are. God's kingdom is about loving God by loving your neighbor. It's about sharing and caring; about being fair and not bullying the weak. It's about caring for your neighbor as if he or she was a member of your own family... And it's about knowing that, in the end, we are *all* family. Amen.

