

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Aug. 18, 2019)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

“You’re not allowed to play here.”

That’s what they told him. “You are not allowed to play here.”

And when he asked “Why?” they told him, “Because of the color of your skin.”

It happened in the 1050’s at the tennis courts in Byrd Park, in Richmond.

Many of you were alive when it happened. You were alive when this talented student from Richmond was told that he was couldn’t play tennis at Byrd Park, because those courts were reserved for ‘whites only.’

Many of you were alive when the best student tennis player in Richmond, who was attending Maggie Walker High School at the time, was not allowed to compete against the Caucasian students in Richmond schools, because athletic events were segregated.

I was alive when this man from Richmond faced resistance as he broke through racial barriers in the world of professional tennis.

I was alive when he won the US Open and the Australian Open.

He is the only African American man to win at Wimbledon. He’s the same man who was told that he couldn’t practice at some of Richmond’s indoor tennis courts because of the color of his skin. Families of every color rallied to support him, and eventually he made his way to other cities, where his training could be improved and he could face competition from better players.

He had a passion. He had a mission. He had a goal. He faced the raw reality of racism right here in Richmond. And he responded with determination and kindness, with skill and sportsmanship. He admitted that, at times, he struggled with faith. But I was told by someone who knew him that he *lived* the Christian virtues. He responded to hate with love.

His detractors did not know what to do with him. He was just so *different*.

He died because of an HIV infection from a blood transfusion. And today, as you drive east on Monument Avenue in Richmond, you see a statue honoring the man who - as a boy - was told, “You can’t play here. Because of the color of your skin.”

You may not be aware that there is a biblical quote carved into the base of the Arthur Ashe statue on Monument Avenue. The next time you drive by, take a moment to notice. The biblical quote on the Arthur Ashe statue is, in fact, the opening line from today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews.

Here is the quote – “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.”

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the sacred author is speaking to a group of Christians who are struggling and burdened. As they face the daily demands of being faithful to the Gospel, they are not sure that they have the strength to complete their mission. That mission, given to them in baptism, is to live their life according to the Gospel of Jesus, and to share the good news of Jesus in word and deed.

But those early Christians were learning something: if you stay faithful to your God-given vocation, if you live according to the Gospel and strive to put your faith into action on a daily basis, *you will be different*.

You will be different than you used to be. You will be different than your neighbors. You will begin to see the world as God sees it, especially the world's injustices and suffering. So, you will not simply and silently accept that things have to stay 'the way they've always been.'

And when you dare to be different by following the Gospel, some people simply won't like you. This is what Jesus alludes to in today's Gospel. AS we strive to stay faithful to the Gospel, others will look at us and they won't understand. And this can lead to discord and division, perhaps with members of your own family, or neighbors, (or the guy who runs the tennis courts at Byrd Park?).

In the Letter to the Hebrews, those weary, early Christians were reminded that we are not alone. We are never alone. In our striving to live the Christian life, in our willingness to be different, we are 'surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.' In Greek, the word is a bit stronger: not simply a 'cloud of witnesses' – the word is actually “martyrs.”

Martyrs. Witnesses.

We have the example of men and women, girls and boys of every century and every place who have been willing to live out their baptismal calling. They follow Christ wholeheartedly, living in a way that is different than others might expect, so that Jesus and his Gospel may be known.

The saints of every age show us that it *is possible*. It *is possible* to live the faith, and love God and love our neighbor. It is possible, even though it may cost us something.

And on Monument Avenue, we are reminded that the witnesses, the ‘encouraging examples,’ are not just from way back in the 3rd century. The witnesses, like Arthur Ashe, have lived in *our* lifetimes too. This young tennis player from Richmond refused to accept that things had to stay ‘the way they’d always been.’ He refused to accept that a talented tennis player would always have to be told that he couldn’t play on this court, because he was the wrong color.

Arthur Ashe was inspired by *other* people who taught him and gave him courage. Now he is one of the ‘witnesses,’ inspiring others, giving them courage.

Who taught you the faith? Who inspired you? Who gives you courage to live the Gospel and be different?

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we are reminded that the ultimate martyr, the ultimate example and witness is *Jesus*. He, too, had a baptismal vocation. He was sent by God so that God’s love could take flesh in the world.

Jesus was different. Boy, was he different! He showed us that a different path is possible. A path of forgiveness, mutual respect, justice, integrity, compassion, the valuing of every life.

He showed us the truth about God. And he paid a price for his willingness to be faithful. He faced the ultimate in opposition.

But, as the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, Jesus endured all that he endured so that YOU AND I could find hope and courage and strength. In whatever struggle we may be facing, wherever we experience the inability to easily live out the Gospel, Jesus is there, so that we will not lose heart.

The children who are being baptized this weekend receive this call, and this promise. They receive the call to be different: to faithfully live out the Gospel of Jesus, even when it’s hard, even when it makes them different. And they receive this promise: that the Risen Lord Jesus is with them now, and with them always.

As all of us journey through life, God blesses us with a cloud of witnesses: people who can inspire us to be faithful to Jesus. Praise God for such encouragement. Praise God everywhere, no matter what Avenue we may be on.