

# The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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September 13, 2015

You may have seen a recent news item that reported the success of the Staples-Motley Minnesota high school football team. It won its first game in five years, breaking a 39 game losing streak, the longest in state history. It's hard to imagine what sustains a group of athletes, or what causes them to go out and try again knowing that some students spent their entire high school years without a single opportunity to celebrate success on the field. And one has to imagine at least a few of those players asking themselves, "Why am I doing this? All the hours of practice? All the scrapes and bruises? All the humiliation? What are we all doing here?" Isn't the point of playing a game to win? Now there's a very good question. And it could be answered in at least a few ways. One could say, "Yes, the point is to win, and I believe that we're on the verge of winning one of these days very soon, and that will be the change in momentum that we need." Or one could say, "No the point is not to win. It's to have fun playing and to develop skills and abilities that will make me a better person and a better sportsman and part of a truer team." Or one could say, "The point is to represent our school the best we can, whatever the outcome. If we win, so much the better, but the purpose is to keep us competing."

So a big part of determining success depends upon what people believe they are trying to accomplish. At a professional level it really is mostly about winning—and perhaps at the college level too. But at high school? It's not as clear. Even at that level, though, it has to be difficult for players to go at it again, knowing that the chances of losing are almost certain.

And that is very much the kind of resolve that Jesus was asking of his first disciples on the day that they took that road trip to Caesarea Phillipi, as today's gospel of Mark tells the story. First came his question, "Who do you say that I am?" Which was just another way of asking, "What do you think is at stake here? How much do you think it matters to get the answer to that question correct? How important do you think is my claim to be the very presence of God almighty in your midst?" After all, lots of people come along in life with claims to make our daily existence easier or happier, whether through a new car, or a new philosophy, or a new diet or a new club. And just about all of them can be ignored without a lot of consequences, if we so choose. But it was Peter—finally!—who was convinced enough to respond with the answer that was both correct and absolute: "You are the Christ," he said. You are the one upon whom I will stake my life, my future, the one for whom I will put at risk absolutely everything else that I hold of value. You are the only one who can own me without qualification. And it was pretty much as though he had just been chosen to be the starting quarter back for the Staples-Motley football team, which is why Jesus was so stern and so careful to make certain that Peter really understood what he was about to step into. Unlike the other gospels that tell this same story, here in Mark Jesus offers no congratulations to his friend Peter for answering well. He does not console Peter that he has been inspired by the wisdom of God. Nor does he promise Peter any blessed assurance that he will become the rock of the church or the holder of the keys to salvation. Nothing. In fact, Jesus says, Peter has just volunteered to lead a team that is going to seem, by any merely earthly measure, to be a loser. Not a *possible* loser; not a *probable* loser; but a Staples-Motley kind of loser. A guarantee. So that if Peter thinks he's signing on to beat the odds or to turn the program around, he is sorely mistaken. And as it turns out, that's *exactly* what Peter thinks he has done. When Jesus answers that he is going to suffer, be rejected and be killed before there would be any first indication of victory, Peter's response is as if to say, "Oh, don't talk like that! We're going to go out there and win the game on Friday night!"

And that is when Jesus calls him "Satan," because Peter thinks that you can measure success in religion in the same way you measure it everywhere else. You *can't*. Not *this* religion. "You are not thinking as God does,"

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Jesus scolds him, “but as human beings do.” Human beings think that true faith should result in some evident benefit to me and to us right now. But not only might that not happen, it *won't* happen—not if we're doing it right and living it well. We're guaranteed losers at this game, at least as our natural sensibilities count success. Like the football team of Staple-Motley, if we are willing to sign up for this thing called Christian discipleship, it had better be for reasons other than how we look in the standings. Because we are going to look pretty embarrassing if that's what matters most. And all that is why the Lord would rather warn Peter away from the mission right now, than have him accept him it with all the wrong set of expectations and false visions of winning. There will certainly be occasional glimpses of progress and just enough evidence to assure us that we have chosen well in hitching our fate to that of Jesus Christ, but no certainty that we will reap the abundant riches in this life, at least not as riches are accounted most everywhere else.

We believe and to follow is to lose, and to lose is to gain. And yes that sounds like a paradox and it can threaten (without faith) to sound like nonsense. But it's the logic of the cross, and the pattern of Our Savior, and our promise of salvation. St. Peter had a hard time making sense of it too. We are in good company.

I read today that the Staples-Motley team has now won a second game this month and has a record of two wins, two losses. It may be a sign of hope, or it may be a fleeting moment in a long history of losing. At some point for the players, the reason for being part of the effort has to be something other than the final score. For us Christians, at least this side of heaven, the same thing must be true.