

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent - John 12: 20-33

About twelve years ago four pizza parlors opened within the same month on the same block in New York City. It soon became apparent that there would not be enough business on that block to support all four. Therefore, the competition for survival began. One owner in an attempt to gain business posted a large sign, **“We serve the best pizza in the city.”** Another was quick to follow suit claiming, **“We offer the best pizza in the country.”** Another rose to the challenge and began to advertise, **“The best pizza in the world is served here!”** The fourth owner was an enterprising woman who finally posted her sign. It read, **“We serve the best pizza on the block.”** The realism of her claim won her many customers, and that shop is still serving pizza today.

How can we apply a similar realism to our role of being a Christian? What claims can we honestly make as followers of Jesus? I thought of these questions earlier this week celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

I have been hearing confessions now for over 24 years. It is clear from my own spiritual life and the lives of others, that from year to year the sins remain the same. Those who were impatient last year are impatient this year.

Those who were judgmental and unkind last year are judgmental and unkind this year. Once this pattern is identified, it is only logical to ask, “How good are we as Christians? Can we make honest claims to be followers of Christ?”

The answer to these questions depends upon how we choose to define success as disciples. Pablo Casals was arguably the finest cellist in history. He lived a long life. At the age of 93 he would still practice on his cello from five to six hours a day.

When one of his friends asked him, “Pablo, why at your age do you still practice so much?” He answered simply, “Because I believe I am making progress.”

Being a disciple of Jesus does not mean that we have achieved perfection. It means we are making progress. And the progress we make need not be earth-shattering.

It can occur in small steps. This is what is so encouraging in Jesus’ words in today’s gospel. We know that Jesus sacrificed and died so that we could live. We also know that we are called to follow His example and sacrifice and die to self through good works and avoiding sin.

However, when Jesus places this challenge before us, He does so with a very consoling image. He says, “Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains a single grain of wheat.

But if it dies, it produces much fruit.” When Jesus wants to tell us that we must sacrifice and change, He uses the image of a very small thing: a single grain of wheat. By this image he tells us that our sacrifice need not be huge, that our dying can be limited, that our growth can occur in little steps.

To be a disciple we do not have to reach a state where we can claim that we never lose our patience. We only need to be more patient than we were last year.

To follow Jesus we do not have to achieve a generosity and simplicity to rival St. Francis. We only need to be more generous than we used to be.

In following Christ's example we do not need to possess a perfect love which never judges another or speaks an unkind word. We only need to have a love which is growing rather than shrinking, expanding rather than turning inward.

Realistically, a disciple is one who is making progress. And it would be wise to set our goals accordingly. So don't say, "I will never lose my temper again." Just try to be patient with your spouse, with your children, with your parents for one day, for a half a day, for a few hours. That would be a step in the right direction.

Don't say, "I will never judge another person or close my mind to a new idea." Just single out one occasion in which you truly try to listen, in which you take in the truth that another is trying to offer you. That would be genuine growth.

Don't say, "I will be totally selfless and only think of others." Just find one person in need or trouble and put yourself out so that he or she might know that someone cares. That would be a single grain of wheat falling to the ground and bearing fruit.

Being a disciple does not mean we have achieved perfection. It means that we are making progress.

You do not have to be the best parent in the world. You only need to be a better parent in your own home. You do not have to be the most generous person in the United States. You only need to

be someone more inclined to show interest in the elderly neighbor who requires your help.

You do not need to be the holiest person here at St. Michael. You only need to take a step closer to becoming the person God calls you to be.

Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains a single grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.  
AMEN.