

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time

Cycle C, 8.21.16

Isaiah 66:18-21; Hebrews 12:5-7,11-13;
Luke 13:22-30

GOING FOR THE GOLD

The movie **Brooklyn**, based on the novel by Colm Toibin, is the charming story of young Irish woman's journey from yesterday to tomorrow. Eilis Lacey grew up in a small Irish village in the early 1950s. She is bright, open and industrious - and there's not much meaningful opportunity for her in her hometown. With the encouragement of her older sister Rose who wants more for her, Eilis decides to make a new life for herself in New York- Brooklyn, to be precise.

While the streets of Brooklyn aren't paved with gold, she discovers many doors are at least partially open to her - if she has the courage to walk through them. It's not a promising start: she suffers serious seasickness on the ocean crossing; the letters from home only exacerbate her homesickness; she feels lost and alienated in this fast-moving, busy American city. But there are people along the way who help Eilis through: the benevolent priest, Fr. Flood, who guides her through this strange, new world; the sharpened-tongued landlady who recognizes Eilis' innate kindness and generosity and looks out for her; and her haughty supervisor at the department store who steps in to step up Eilis' fashion sense. In time, Eilis manages to move beyond her loneliness. She takes night classes in accounting and excels. And she meets Tony and his Italian-American family. Eilis has a future.

But Eilis is suddenly called back to Ireland for a family emergency. It's a difficult, confusing homecoming. Little has changed in Ireland - but Eilis has changed more than she's realized. She finally confronts her guilt for leaving her mother and sister and the cruel narrowness of her

past. As Eilis says, her body has been in America for some time, but her heart had not made it fully across the ocean. Now it, too, had completed the crossing. On her way back to America, Eilis befriends another young Irish woman making her way to America. She gives her some advice from the lessons she herself learned, lessons that were not easy:



"You'll feel so homesick that you'll want to die, and there's nothing you can do about it apart from endure it. But you will, and it won't kill you. And one day the sun will come out - you might not even notice straight away, it'll be that faint. And then you'll catch yourself thinking about something or someone who has no connection with the past. Someone who's only yours. And you'll realize . . . that this is where your life is."

As Eilis discovers, life is a series of difficult passages, "narrow doors" we all struggle through - and there is no easy way to pass through them. That's her advice - the lessons she's learned. The Word of God offers us some friendly advice today, although, at first hearing, it may not sound so friendly. The Letter to the Hebrews uses a word that few of us like - "discipline." *Do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him; for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines... Endure your trials as "discipline."* Discipline has a harsh and negative ring to it. It seems more like punishment than something beneficial. While we may not like the word, one group of people comes to mind who have no

choice but to be disciplined if they want to be successful – the Olympic athletes we’ve been watching for the past two weeks.



While all of those Olympic athletes have been gifted with God-given ability, all of them have had to be disciplined and patient as they continued to develop and accelerate at their chosen sport. The numerous laps in the pool by Michael Phelps and Katie Ledecky, the miles of running by Kerron Clement, and the countless hours in the gym by female gymnasts – Simone Biles and Laurie Hernandez, all have resulted in the performances that were given at the critical moments in Rio de Janeiro. These athletes, as they went through their training regimens, had to stay disciplined and patient that the work would ultimately result in reaching the goals they had set for themselves. All of them had to endure difficult times, but they stayed the course knowing if they stuck with the plan they would be able to achieve great results.

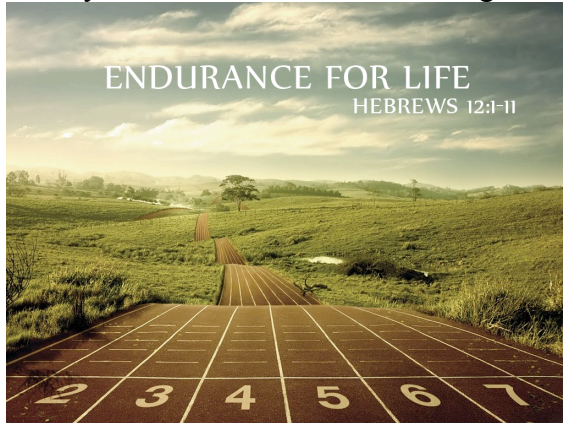
Perhaps the most disciplined were the members of the Olympic Refugee Team. These young people, who fled from violence and war in their home countries of South Sudan and Kenya, Syria and Ethiopia, had to believe in themselves above all odds and accept the discipline of their sport as a means of new life and freedom. Again, the wisdom of the Letter to the Hebrews ransoms the word “discipline” from its

unsavory meaning. *At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it.* You can’t do it on your own, however. Like the helpful people in the movie Brooklyn who assisted Eilis find her way, during the difficult times is when gifted coaches were most critical to maintaining the Olympic athletes’ focus and supporting them to keep their eyes on the goal. A few verses before today’s epistle reading, the Letter to the Hebrews uses athletic imagery to connect our faith in Christ to the discipline that athletes need: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*

St. Paul grew up and lived in Greece, the birthplace of the Olympics. He would have seen and known first-hand the challenge that athletic discipline presents, and he used it as a teaching tool when he preached the Gospel to the Corinthians: *You’ve all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. So, then, run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You’re after one that’s gold eternally. I don’t know about you, but I’m running hard for the finish line. I’m giving it everything I’ve got. No sloppy living for me! I’m staying alert and in top condition. I’m not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.*

So what is the particular discipline to which our Lord calls you at this Eucharist? Is it the discipline of prayer which is so easy to neglect in our distracted lives? The discipline of holding your tongue when you want to argue or bicker with a family member? The discipline of patience when people and events around you cause you frustration? Maybe the discipline of putting

a smile on our faces more often throughout the day to make this world a little brighter?



For us in our field of competition, our vocations as Christians, the "narrow door" to which Jesus points is the way of limitless love, unconditional forgiveness, sacrificial selflessness. It can only be entered by letting go of our fears, our control, our pride, our self-absorption. To go through the narrow door is to be humble enough to realize the greatness of God's creation and the grace to seek the love of God within it. By taking the "narrow door," by enduring the discipline that our faith requires, we move beyond easy answers and immediate gratification to discover the meaning and purpose of this life God has given us. And more often than not, we can be that "door" for someone struggling through.

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