

**“He shall surely live, he shall not die.”** (Homily)

Deacon John Fulton, St. Kevin Roman Catholic Church, Warwick, Rhode Island  
October 1, 2017, Twenty-six Sunday in Ordinary Time  
(Lectionary: 136; EZ 18:25-28; PHIL 2:1-5; MT 21:28-32)

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“But if he turns from the wickedness he has committed,  
he does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life;  
since he has turned away from all the sins that he has committed,  
he shall surely live, he shall not die.” EZ 18:27-28

Do you believe this? I do. I believe it, heart and soul. I believe it in my bones. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Twice, actually, though I will tell of only one instance, today, one conversion, one soul saved, by the providence of the Father, the merciful sacrifice of the Son, and the grace of the Holy Spirit:

My friend, Sidney, was a chief priest, and by the time I knew him, an elder as well, a “full” professor of medicine—and of psychiatry!—a man with a shelf-full of publications, and a reputation that preceded him. In short, he was a great man among great men, born of a patrician family in Boston (about 1918, near as I can figure). His Father was a great man of medicine, still remembered to this day at Harvard Medical School. Sidney’s birth was noted twice, once in the book that almost killed him—the infamous Blue Book, the Who’s Who of Boston’s upper class—and again, in the book that ultimately saved him—the baptismal register of his family’s church.

Sid followed in his father’s footsteps, went to Harvard, became a physician, and more than a physician: a “full” professor of Medicine, president of a Medical Society, a man of great repute, sought after as teacher, speaker, and leader, a chief priest among high priests.

And it all went to his head. He was full of himself. Saint Paul must have wept, for Sidney took the Apostle’s advice and stood it on its head:

He did many things out of selfishness,  
and much out of vainglory;  
he recognized the value of humility  
—but only in those beneath his station in life—  
and constantly looked out for his own interests,  
for ways to advance his reputation and career.  
Indeed, equality with God was something Sidney grasped,  
wielding life-saving miracles at the bedside of patients.

But the Lord had other plans for Sidney. Obstacle after obstacle was thrown in Sidney’s path!

He moved from Michigan to Rhode Island to accept a professorship at Brown University, but the job offer turned out to be fake. The man who recruited him was mentally ill. Then, too, his health began to fail. His rheumatoid arthritis worsened, limiting his physical abilities, and he was diagnosed with a debilitating cancer. Finally, his wife—she who had borne so much of her husband’s insufferable superiority—reached her limit one day, and just left.

They say bad luck comes in threes. I don’t know. I can’t say. But here’s what I do know: Defeat is *humbling*. And humbling can be good for the soul. It brings an emptying of self, and room for God. It sparks self-reflection, and regret, and repentance. It can turn a life around. It can redeem a life. And who is to say that God’s hand is not in all this?

I witnessed the troubles that beset Sidney, one after another. I listened to his Job-like complaints, his self-reflection, his questioning. And one fine fall day, I heard him repent. I heard him reclaim his baptism, heard him reflect on the providence of the Father, the merciful sacrifice of the Son, and the grace of the Holy Spirit. Now, Sid knew his Bible, and he turned to it for guidance in adversity. It was there, opened, near-to-hand that afternoon. Had he been reading St. Paul? Perhaps, “Do nothing out of vainglory?” Or “Regard others as more important than yourself?” I do not know.

But I do know that Sid turned his life around, just as if St. Paul were challenging him at every step. He devoted the remainder of his life to others. He established a support group, Mentored young academics, sponsored a young refugee, gave away countless dollars, and reconciled with many. I visited Sidney on his deathbed. He spoke lovingly of God, and gratefully of neighbor. He died in the peace that only God can give.

“Now, a man had [a son].  
He came to [him] and said, ‘Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.’  
He said in reply, ‘I will not,’  
but afterwards [by the grace of God!] he changed his mind and went.”

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“And since he turned away from all the sins he committed,  
he shall surely live, he shall not die, but have everlasting life.”

Amen, amen.

I love you, Sid! Go with God!

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Ezekiel 18:25-28

Thus says the LORD:

You say, “The LORD's way is not fair!”

Hear now, house of Israel:

Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair?

When someone virtuous turns away from virtue to commit iniquity, and dies,  
it is because of the iniquity he committed that he must die.

But if he turns from the wickedness he has committed,  
and does what is right and just,

he shall preserve his life;

since he has turned away from all the sins that he has committed,  
he shall surely live, he shall not die.

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Philippians 2:1-5

Brothers and sisters:

If there is any encouragement in Christ,  
any solace in love,

any participation in the Spirit,

any compassion and mercy,

complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love,  
united in heart, thinking one thing.

Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory;

rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves,  
each looking out not for his own interests,  
but also for those of others.

Have in you the same attitude  
that is also in Christ Jesus.

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Gospel: Matthew 21:28-32

Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people:

“What is your opinion?

A man had two sons.

He came to the first and said,

‘Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.’

He said in reply, ‘I will not,’

but afterwards changed his mind and went.

The man came to the other son and gave the same order.

He said in reply, ‘Yes, sir,’ but did not go.

Which of the two did his father's will?”

They answered, “The first.”

Jesus said to them, “Amen, I say to you,

tax collectors and prostitutes

are entering the kingdom of God before you.

When John came to you in the way of righteousness,

you did not believe him;

but tax collectors and prostitutes did.

Yet even when you saw that,

you did not later change your minds and believe him.”