

I want to start with some good news. We have made our New Bethlehem Project goal! We at Holy Family have raised over \$702,000 for the new 24-7 building. Thank you so much. You are incredible. The total raised for the project from all sources is \$832,000 so we still have a ways to go to get to a million, but I'm confident it will happen.

Second, I didn't preach about the Catholic Annual Appeal last week – so I want to mention it today. It's so important for us to support the larger Catholic Church in western Washington. I think the new Bethlehem Project is a perfect example of how we can scale up our efforts precisely because we are bigger than one parish. Not only have we had help from other parishes for New Bethlehem, but the Catholic Housing Authority and CCS are central to operating the Homeless Center. Our goal this year is \$310,000. So far we have pledged \$126,000. Please join me in making a significant pledge to the appeal this year. Now to my homily.

[Prayer]

Many of you have been to funerals at Holy Family. You know that the casket begins at the back of the church in that door [points]. The priest blesses the casket. Then, the priest, servers, casket, with family processing behind it, all come down the main aisle as the opening hymn is sung. Monday/(tomorrow) we have a funeral for a man who, while he will never be canonized, was a good man. He was faithful in his attendance at mass, prayer. He loved God, family, and his neighbor.

Now imagine Monday morning that as we enter the church applause breaks out. And not a subdued clapping as at a symphony. It's cheers and whoops! It's like when athletes come out of the tunnel of a large stadium filled with tens of thousands. And the cheering is all for the man who has died. But the cheering isn't from the congregation. It will be small. The man was 96. He's outlived most of his friends. The cheering is from all the man's friends and family already in heaven. That is what really happens at a funeral if we could only believe it.

Today we celebrate the feast of The Ascension. This is the feast when we focus on heaven, not just on Jesus' going there, but on what heaven's like. Let's read Hebrews 12:1-2. "Therefore, 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. For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God."

Right before this passage in Hebrews 11 there's a whole list of saints of the Old testament, members of God's heavenly Hall of Fame, who are cheering on the Christians hearing this letter to the Hebrews. That is how we ought to see our lives. We are in this huge stadium. The stands are packed. It's a sell-out. And where are you? On the field, playing, literally, the game of your life.

I mention these images because I want to help you sign over the title deed of your life to Christ as I preached last weekend. So, here's another image. It's the 12th man. The Seahawks fans claim that title, but it began in College Station where Texas A&M plays football. The students there stand for the whole game, 103,000 people, stomping and shouting for three hours. It's crazy. That's what a Seahawks game is like, I hear. Real fans, the 12th Man, don't come to watch the game. They come to change the game. That's why home games are so great – what an advantage – to have a 12th player in the stands.

The saints in heaven aren't looking at us with their feet up, glad to be done, safely in heaven. They aren't done! They're the 12th man, cheering us on, praying for us, still changing the game. How do we know that? They love God and their neighbor. We're their neighbors still. Right now you have family and friends cheering you on in life.

The whole point of this homily is to help overcome the fear that if we sign the card, we'll lose everything. No! The cloud of witnesses

contains all kinds of saints. There are Popes, bishops and priests and nuns, yes, but there are also husbands and wives, politicians, artists, soldiers, poets, engineers, children, slaves, kings – everybody! There are people in heaven who are just like you and me. The only difference between us is that at some point they all had a life changing encounter with Jesus and signed the title-deed of their lives away to Him. They let Him drive their truck. They surrendered. “Do what you want with my life, Jesus.”

The problem we have is fear. We’re afraid if we really did that – and meant it -- we would lose our identity. We would lose control of our lives. We would have a lesser life. We would become weirdos. We’re not good enough.

God promises abundant life to us. Here’s is a story of one sinner and saint, Augustine of Hippo. He was a man of large appetites. He thirsted for truth, knowledge, beauty. He struggled with the Gospel. He wanted to be baptized. He heard St. Ambrose preaching and was

convinced – but there was chastity. He knew he couldn't do that. Then he had a vision of a huge host of saints walking past him, and one by one they all said to him, "Can you not do what we have done?" He knew they were praying for him. He signed the card.

Be great! This is the Ascension, the feast of heaven. No matter how alone or defeated you feel, remember, in your life you're playing a home game. You have family and friends in heaven, on their feet cheering and praying for you. We're surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. There is nothing greater than giving everything to God. Sign the card.