

**Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – October 1, 2017**  
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As some of you may have heard, I am a fan of the St. Louis Cardinals. Some years we have a lot to cheer about – some years, not so much. And then there are years like this one. We have had moments of greatness this year – a long winning streak, our time in contention. And we have had weeks of disappointment – eight or more games out of first place, injuries and errors. In July, it looked as though our season was completely over. We had virtually no chance of winning the National League Central Division – and we were even further out of the wild card race. In the St. Louis newspaper, and in conversations among the fans, we were concentrating on next year. Would we be looking for a new manager? Would we be able to trade for some pitching? And then something miraculous happened in August – we started winning. Not just one or two games, but a consistent pattern of winning. Of course, if we had done that earlier in the year, our focus wouldn't have already drifted to 2018 – but there you have it. We had been mediocre for most of the year – but suddenly, we were in contention again for a wild card spot – until last Thursday, that is. A team like ours is exciting and exasperating at the same time – we're thrilled that the team sometimes finds the way to win – but do they have to wait until it was too late to do it!

In our gospel today, Jesus tells us a parable featuring a father who must be as frustrated as any Cardinal fan. There is work that needs to be done in the family vineyard. The father asks both of his two sons to go out and work – the first says no, but the second says yes. Relieved that the second son was taking care of things, the father undoubtedly went about his other business. And then, I'm sure word got back to him that the second son was nowhere to be found. True, he had told his father that he would do the work – but then he skipped out, leaving the vineyard untended. Like a Cardinal fan in July, I'm sure that the father was ready to throw up his hands in frustration at both of his sons when, surprise, that first son changed his mind. Although he had told his father that he would not help out, he went to the vineyard anyway and took care of the needed work. Jesus asks the assembled crowd – which son did his father's will? The first they answered, and technically, I suppose, they are correct. But I think Jesus is asking a bit of a trick question. The ideal son would be the one who said yes and actually did the work he promised he would do. But in this parable, there is no ideal son. All we have are two less than ideal sons – one who says no, but who changes his mind and works, and one who says yes, but does no work. In many ways, this parable is just being realistic. An ideal disciple would be one who said yes and who completely followed the Lord. An ideal disciple would be one who never sinned, never turned his or her back upon God. But, in reality, there are precious few ideal disciples. From time to time, all of us fall short, all of us turn

away in sin. All of us say yes and then fail to follow-up. All of us say no, but then think better of it, feel guilty, or change our minds. Just as a baseball team doesn't win every game, so a disciple isn't always perfect. But imperfect as we are, we need to do a better job of keeping our eye on the ball, of following through – not just giving up.

As we strive to do a better job, let our second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians be our guide. Paul encourages us to work together, to concentrate: "complete my joy," he says, "by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing." Now, candidly, we find it difficult to be of the same mind and the same heart about anything – even by ourselves for 3 minutes. How are we supposed to be of the same mind and heart as the Church, as the Christian community? Well, Paul tells us: Have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus. What follows is one of the more ancient and most beautiful texts of the New Testament. It is probably a hymn from the earliest days of the Church which Paul quotes here to make his point so effectively. Christ, we hear, though he was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. That is one of the most magnificent explanations of the incarnation that we will ever hear. Christ emptied himself, surrendered his will, his very existence, to take on human flesh, human likeness and appearance. Why? To humble himself, to become obedient to the point of death. Both of those sons in our parable stand in contrast to Jesus. One son was obedient out of remorse or guilt, the other not obedient at all. Presented with the work of the vineyard, the owner's sons had their own agenda. They were not much interested in accomplishing the Father's will. Presented with the cross, Jesus didn't say, "Wait a minute, let me see if I can fit suffering and death into my calendar." He embraced the Father's will – as humiliating and painful as it was. And we are to do the same.

Now, being Christ-like is a tall order – and just like those sons in the parable, we are likely to fall short pretty often. But that doesn't mean that we stop trying. That doesn't mean that we give up on the season in July. That doesn't mean that – having said no, having fallen down in sin, we don't get back on our feet and start doing the will of the Father. That's why in our parable today, the first son is held in higher esteem than the second. Sure, both of them fell down on the job, but at least the first got back up and got to work. Unlike Christ, we fail in humility, in obedience, in charity and love all the time. We say no to God or we say yes and don't follow through. But with the grace of the sacrament of reconciliation, with the power of the Holy Spirit, we can begin again, we can go back to the vineyard and roll up our sleeves and start to work. It is never too late to become a disciple. It is never too late to accomplish the will of God.