

Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must **STRENGTHEN YOUR BROTHERS.**"
(Luke 22, 31-32)



Jesus, looking at her, loved her

April 30, 2014

Dear Brothers in the Lord,

The photograph you see above was taken just a few weeks ago, on April 5, toward the end of our annual Mass for the Special Needs Community. In it you see Stephanie Soha giving me the best gift I have ever received.

Unbeknownst to me, the planning committee had discussed giving me a gift in appreciation of archdiocesan efforts to support the Special Needs Community. Apparently at some point in the discussion, Stephanie announced that she wanted to give me the Gold Medal she had been awarded as part of the U.S. Special Olympics soccer team. I'm told that everyone was taken aback by her announcement and questioned if she really wanted to do such a thing - after all, the Gold Medal represented hours of practice, highly honed skills, and the dream of a lifetime. But Stephanie was resolute - she wanted me to have her Gold Medal.

After Holy Communion, as one of the members of the community stood at the cantor's microphone and announced the gift, Stephanie and a friend walked slowly toward me. I will never

forget her poise, the smile on her face, and the joy in her step as she approached the cathedra. I took off my glasses and leaned slightly forward as she placed the medal and its multicolor ribbon around my neck. Smiling broadly, she returned to her place. What do you say at a time such as that? I said something simple that seemed the only appropriate response: “This is the best gift I have ever received in my whole life.” I meant it.

I’m grateful that two or three days before the liturgy, Erica Cohen-Moore had given me a “heads up” about the medal, knowing I would be caught off-guard by such an extraordinary gesture. More than caught off-guard, I was blown away. Just reading Erica’s e-mail I was moved beyond words, and over the next few days I thought about Stephanie’s gift, what it meant, what it teaches me, and how I would react in the moment. Since April 5, I have found myself reflecting on it again and again. Stephanie has taught me many things, and chief among them is the importance of detachment.

Stephanie let go of something precious to her, something for which she had worked long and hard, something that represented the achievement of a goal she had set for herself, something that made her parents and friends proud. She could have framed it and hung it on the wall of her room, understandably admiring it as a memento from a shining moment in her life. She could have worn it around her neck for all to see! Instead, she gave it away as a gesture of thanks.

Attachments, whatever their nature, can weigh us down. They can own us and enslave us. They can so occupy our hands and hearts that we are not free to give wholeheartedly of ourselves, not free to love. They can be material, to be sure; but they can also be emotional, ideological, or behavioral. Ironically, we can even become attached to our problems.

The early Christian hymn Paul quotes in Philippians 2 proposes a contrast between Adam and Jesus, though Adam is not mentioned in the hymn. Created in God’s image and likeness, Adam succumbed to the serpent’s temptation to grasp at equality with God (“God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad.” Gn 3:5). Jesus, God’s own son, did not cling to his equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself (Phil 2:6).

Wittingly or unwittingly, we grasp at attachments, hold them in tightly clenched fists, wear them around our necks, and find it difficult to imagine life without them. But the Lord emptied himself of every attachment and gave himself freely.

Mark links two significant moments in Jesus’ ministry – his encounter with the children people were bringing to have him touch them, and his encounter with the man who had many possessions – in an instructive way. When his disciples rebuke the people who were bringing the children to him, he replies:

Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it. (Mk 10, 14-15)

Mark immediately introduces the encounter with the man of many possessions to help explain what Jesus was saying about having the attitude of children.

The man runs up to Jesus to ask him the key to eternal life. Is it to keep the commandments? If so, he has been doing that his whole life. Jesus acknowledges the importance of the commandments but adds that there is one more thing the man must do: give away everything he owns to the poor, so that he will have treasure in heaven. The man walks away sad, his face downcast, for he has many possessions. Jesus nods to his disciples that what he is asking is a hard thing, even an impossible thing. It's hard to give up an attachment that stands between us and accepting God's kingdom, an attachment so heavy that it makes it difficult for us to follow him with joy. It's hard because we have lost a spontaneous, child-like way of living: "Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." The man's riches had rendered him incapable of receiving the kingdom like a child.

I often picture myself as the man running up to Jesus to ask the key to eternal life. I, too, have been following the commandments as best I could all my life. But Jesus says to me, "You are lacking in one thing. Go and..." Go and... what? The possibilities can be unsettling, challenging, endless. It's entirely possible that there's something in the way, an obstacle I keep tripping over, a wall of my own construction so high I can't see over it, a possession so cumbersome I can't wriggle loose from it, an attachment so possessive of my attention that it can only be wrenched from me.

The way each of us might complete the sentence would certainly vary. Perhaps it is indeed, "Go and stop obsessing about money and material things. They are distracting you from the kingdom." Or perhaps, "Go and forgive that person against whom you have been holding a grimacing grudge. It's getting in the way of your accepting my kingdom like a child." Or perhaps, "Go and swallow your pride and tell someone you need help with a problem." Perhaps it's, "Go and let go of your accomplishments. They've duped you into relying too much on yourself." Or maybe, "Go and ask forgiveness for the offense you committed. Your refusal to accept my mercy is making it difficult for you to feel my love for you." Or perhaps, "Go and pay no heed to your fears. 'Fear is not a good advisor because it gives you bad advice'" (Pope Francis, April 4).

Does the completion of the sentence entail something far beyond my reach, something distasteful or utterly impossible? Is the Lord angry and disappointed because I'm such a slow learner? When I am frustrated with myself for my sluggish and ungenerous response to the Lord, I find comfort in Mark's description of Jesus' reaction to the young man: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him..." Every challenge the Lord extends to us, every invitation to be stretched and grown by his grace, is at the same time an expression of his personal, loving care for us. He would not ask us to carry a cross that is not at the same time a share in his cross, a share in his love. This is something

to keep in mind particularly at times of painful trial or painful letting go: *Jesus, looking at me, loves me.*

Stephanie gave me a medal and a necessary lesson in discipleship. With the spontaneity, freedom, and love of a child of God, she taught me something invaluable about my need for detachment. Not clinging to something precious to her, something that signaled the height of her personal accomplishments, she freely gave – and her face radiated joy. Do I so freely give of myself, so joyfully surrender my attachments?

“You are lacking in one thing. Go and...” The way we complete the sentence gives us something to yearn for and pray for, because we know we cannot do it by ourselves. For God all things are possible, especially to those who accept the kingdom like a child. After all, the kingdom is a gift, not an award – and getting rid of heavy attachments leaves our hands and hearts free to receive it.

Sincerely in Christ,

Archbishop Peter Sartain