

Great Things in Small Packages

Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop, January 10, 2008

On Thursday, a boy of perhaps 13 or 14 asked me if I wanted to go one-on-one. He must have seen how many buckets I was missing. After all, the kid wasn't much more than four feet tall. "No, thanks," I replied. "My back's messed up from skiing and I'm practicing for a game with a bunch of healthy youth-group guys tomorrow. I need to make sure I survive."

I felt bad about turning him down. He didn't mind. Within two minutes he was down at the other end of the court. There, four men in their 20's had just finished playing two-on-two. The shortest was my height, around 5'10". The tallest was easily 6'3". They'd been playing an aggressive match, in which a six-footer would charge the basket, no matter what the opposition. Meanwhile, Mr. Tall would simply shoot over everyone's head. But there was that little kid, practicing three-pointers with the rest.

Soon they were playing three-on-one, where the last one to make a bucket goes against everyone else. Sure enough, there was The Kid among them, wrestling for the rebound, tossing up from the 3-point line, and appearing to be completely undaunted by the fact that he could have been squashed.

Height, of course, is a big deal in basketball. According to Wikipedia, "At the professional level, most male players are above 6 ft 3 inches and most women above 5 ft 7 in. Guards, for whom physical coordination and ball-handling skills are crucial, tend to be the smallest players. Almost all forwards in the men's pro leagues are 6 ft 6 in. or taller. Most centers are over 6 ft 10 in. tall. According to a survey given to all NBA teams, the average height of all NBA players is just under 6 ft 7 in., with the average weight being close to 222 lb. The tallest players ever in the NBA were Manute Bol and Gheorghe Mureșan, who were both 7 ft 7 in. tall. The tallest current NBA player is Yao Ming, who stands at 7 ft 6 in."

"The shortest player ever to play in the NBA," continues Wikipedia, "is Muggsy Bogues at 5 ft 3 in. Other short players have thrived at the pro level. Anthony 'Spud' Webb was just 5 feet 7 inches tall, but had a 42-inch vertical leap, giving him significant height when jumping. The shortest player in the NBA today is Earl Boykins at 5 feet 5 inches. While shorter players are often not very good at defending against shooting, their ability to navigate quickly through crowded areas of the court and steal the ball by reaching low are strengths." (*"Basketball", modified Jan. 10, '08*)

I once saw Muggsy in action with the Golden State Warriors. Everyone loved him. It's not just that we all favor the underdog. Watching Muggsy was even better than watching the Phoenix Sun's Steve Nash, who, though he's actually 6'3", looks smaller from the way he moves. Muggsy could get around any obstacle, could steal from the best, and compensated for his lack-of-height by his lightning speed and incredibly skillful dribbling.

But we couldn't help loving him because he was a tiny man among giants.

Like Little Nemo at table with hungry sharks, or the Hobbits making their way to Mordor, or the munchkins facing the Wicked Witch's furious sister.

How could anyone refuse to love a tiny person who tries to survive in a land full of giants who have, at their fingertips, the power to destroy them?

Is this not the Christmas story? Are we not drawn irresistibly to the cradle of the God who became, for us, such a tiny baby? Like the shepherds who left their sheep behind to adore the Christ-child, or the three wise men who journeyed from beyond the horizon to lay their treasures at the feet of the newborn King, do we not feel our heart burning within us for love of him?

Do we not sense a deep pity, if not even hatred, for a Herod who would do anything to eliminate this miniature gift from heaven? The wicked king of Jerusalem – who was no true Jew at all – killed all Bethlehem's baby boys, if only to feel certain that the rising star threatening his power would be extinguished. Insecure to the core, he would sacrifice innocent human life on the altar of his ambitions, before the idol of his inflated sense of self.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, and all who read this reflection, know that what Herod did to Bethlehem's Innocents out of irrational fear, we have done as a nation now for thirty-five years. The anniversary of the most unjustifiable and poorly-argued decision of our nation's highest court should shame every person of conscience in our country. All the centuries of slavery, the exploitation of Native American peoples and of immigrant populations, the mistreatment of women, and every other crime which once was considered socially acceptable in these United States, are, combined, far less horrendous than the consequences of Roe v. Wade.

Do the research yourselves. But look, above all, at the statistics. Face the fact of the actual number of babies torn from the womb or scalded to death by licensed physicians whose principle mission is supposedly to promote life, health and well-being. Study the various mechanisms of abortion. Read the stories of those who have suffered the psychological and spiritual

traumas of their own misbegotten choices. And then review, in depth, the true story of a broken woman named “Roe” who was herself exploited by those who had an agenda, lending her name to the lies and distortions that, despite all the learning of the presiding judges, clouded their minds to the obvious truth about life. Future generations will judge us for our silence and complicity. Our descendents - at least those we allow to be brought into the world - will ask themselves, “Why were our ancestors so blind?”

I bet some of you wish I had just left this issue alone. Well, it wasn't my intention to write about life. I was going to compare the kid on the court to the rise of unexpected candidates to the presidency. But God had another idea. He steered this article in the direction He chose, which is Life. And so once again, as I do every year at this time, I will quote Sacred Scripture:

“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” (God through Moses, Deuteronomy 30:19-21).

I invite anyone who cares about this issue and wishes to make public their support for life to join thousands of people from all walks of life, locations, and persuasions of faith in San Francisco next Saturday, January 19th. We will walk for life, as we have now for three years. Those speaking from the stage have represented both Republicans and Democrats, Christians and other faiths, Feminists and more traditional people, and local politicians.

I must warn you, though, that this year the confrontation may be on the rise.

The “Coalition for Reproductive Rights” has been granted, by authorities of the city, permission to use the plaza from which we've always launched our walk. This means we'll be off on the grass and will experience more visible opposition from the start. This walk is not for the faint-of-heart. On the first annual walk, we saw and heard a lot of highly offensive material.

On the other hand, nothing we will experience in the city which is proud to rival Sodom and Gomorrah (although many people of faith and of godly values still live there) can come close to Jesus' Way of the Cross, or for that matter to what every one of those fifty million babies suffered when they underwent the abortion that legally terminated their lives in their mother's womb. It's the least we can do for the most vulnerable ones in our midst.