

Making the Final Cut

“Have you understood all this?” They said to him, “Yes.” –Matthew 13:51

Prayer: *O Lord, give us the wisdom to discern the difference between the treasure and the trash; and then, O Lord, give us the guts to go for the gold that we might partake of the joy of your kingdom. Help us to learn both from you as our Teacher, and from one another as fellow pilgrims on the way. Amen.*

This has been a busy week for Phoenix sports fans. Not only are the Diamondbacks continuing to do well, but the NFL lockout has almost been settled. Yes, the fall sports are already in the news.

These next few weeks are a special time for the Arizona Cardinals players as they seek to make it in their chosen career as a professional athlete. These camps are times of training, but for many this is also a time of ***Making the Final Cut*** and becoming a team member. The thoughts for many are centered on achieving a lifetime goal.

Over twenty-five years ago the story about a gymnast, Scott Johnson, was first published. Scott was a member of the University of Nebraska gymnastics team and a candidate for the Olympic team. “Even in the heat of the most pressure-filled moment of his life, Scott Johnson was able to stop and realize how close he had come to his goal. For five years, he had worked five hours a day, six days a week. And now, on the final event of the Men’s Gymnastics trials, he was one dismount away. ‘One more trick,’ he remembered thinking.

Johnson knew he was in sixth place, and there was only one thing that would prevent him from making the United States Olympic Team. He said to himself, ‘All I’ve got to do is land on my feet.’” “Later he said the moment was excruciating, but it was followed by one he will not soon forget: the perfect dismount from the parallel bars, accompanied by the knowledge that he must be on the team. ‘That was the greatest feeling I had in my whole life,’ said Johnson, who wound up fifth. The top six and two alternates made the team.”

“Land on my feet!” That’s what it all came down to for Scott Johnson. An athlete had ***Made the Final Cut*** for the U. S. Olympic Team. It was that team that went on to win an unexpected gold medal in the 1984 Olympics.

We also know about ***Making the Final Cut***. Yes, all of us have been in that same kind of position in the past. Maybe it was not the Olympic Team. It may have been the junior high basketball team or maybe it was the select chorus at the high school. We have all waited for the list to be posted with our name on it indicating that we ***Made the Final Cut***.

Then again maybe ***The Final Cut*** is closer to home. Maybe you can recall that time years ago in a job interview when you came out hoping above all hope that you would get hired. Or maybe still you were one of those persons who found yourself working for a corporation that had just been bought out and now you are uncertain if you will have a job the next week.

And then there is the phone call from the doctor's office saying, "We need to see you immediately."

We have all been through those experiences of uncertainty and some *Make the Final Cut* and others do not make it.

Today's scripture leads us to think about *The Final Cut*. That's the cut we all want to make ... when what we call in Biblical language the "final judgment" comes ... when *The Final Cut* is made by God ... we all want to "land on our feet." We all want to find the joy and peace of God's salvation and the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Maybe you have heard the rather trite poem of long ago.

*I dreamed death came the other night,
And Heaven's gate swung wide.
With kindly grace, an angel ushered me inside.
And there to my astonishment stood folk I'd known on earth.
Some I'd judged and labeled as "unfit" or of "little worth."
Indignant words rose to my lips, but never were set free,
For every face showed stunned surprise ...
No one expected me!*

How did Jesus describe that experience of *The Final Cut*? He told a simple parable, a kind of riddle with great meaning. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad." (Matthew 13:47-48)

There will be a choosing in God's Kingdom: some will not make it and others will *Make the Final Cut*. Sometimes we choose to ignore that our Biblical faith brings real judgment. Jesus came with love, forgiveness and grace. But Jesus also came with a vision that all of us would be held responsible for his or her service in life. "The fish in the net will be sorted" and there will be *The Final Cut* for you and me!

The issue for us in the scripture is the question of where are we headed? I am sure many of us are convinced that we are not good enough. "Old so and so will make it, but I'm not sure about myself." We hear the words that Jesus used when addressing the disciples: "Have you understood all this?" (Matthew 13:51) We are not at all sure that we can say "Yes." Our confidence is low and we feel ill-prepared. But that does not mean that we have to accept our failures.

In the book *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen has written about the first time he saw the Grand Canyon. It impressed him as a gigantic wound in the side of the earth. A wound, and yet as the sun danced on the walls of the canyon in the late afternoon, he was struck by the awesome beauty. He wrote, "There is something beautiful about our wounds, in other words, something about our suffering and our humanness that is profoundly redemptive."

We can *Make the Final Cut!* as we respond to God's call to serve. We can trust in God and quit trying to create false securities in our possessions and properties. We can believe in ourselves as a true child of God who is fully loved and forgiven. We can look at the wounds in our lives and discover the beauty of God's redemptive power working within us.

We can live knowing that there is a gift out there for each of us: A pearl of great value. We know that! We have all heard the Gospel story as it tells us of the generosity of God. But we are still the ones who must respond.

Do you suppose Jesus was suggesting that there are treasures of great value that might be buried just underneath our feet? Could he be saying that this treasure that he describes as the reign of God is so amazing that, when we find it, we are filled with immeasurable joy? So much joy, in fact, that we are willing to go to great lengths to procure it. He may also be suggesting that sometimes, like the pearl merchant, we must use all our savvy, all our wisdom, and all of our experience in order to find that which is of ultimate worth. It is relatively easy to find average pearls, average, even if compelling, things upon which to squander our resources.

Those who *Make the Final Cut* have responded with their love, their kindness, and their compassion for others. They have responded with their striving for justice, righteousness, and peace for all. They knew they would be held responsible for their actions. They had heard the call of Christ: “*Seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness and all things will be given to you.*” (Matthew 6:33)

Renowned preacher and storyteller Fred Craddock swears this happened to him. He was visiting in a home of one of his former students after graduation, and after a great dinner, the young parents excused themselves and hustled the kids off to bed. Fred found himself in the living room with the family pet—a large, sleek greyhound. Earlier in the evening Fred had watched the kids roll on the floor playing with the family dog. “That’s a full-blooded greyhound there,” the father of the kids had told Fred. “He once raced professionally down in Florida. Then we got him. Great dog with the kids, that greyhound.”

Fred absolutely claimed that the following actually happened. While, sitting there with the dog, the dog turned to Fred and asked, “This your first visit to Connecticut?” “No,” Fred answered. “I went to school up here a long time ago.”

“Well, I guess you heard. I came up here from Miami,” said the greyhound. “Oh, yeah, you retired?” Fred said. “No, is that what they told you? No, no, I didn’t retire. I tell you, I spent 10 years as a professional, racing greyhound. That means 10 years of running around that track day after day, seven days a week with others chasing that rabbit. Well, one day, I got up close; I got a good look at that rabbit. It was a fake! I had spent my whole life chasing a fake rabbit! Hey, I didn’t retire; I quit!”

Here we are ... many of us retired ... no, we just quit our previous job. As Christians we continually strive to find that meaningful expression of our Christian faith every day.

This is our hope, this is our promise—that the kingdom—the reign of God—is already at work in our midst, even if it has not yet come in fullness. May we, in the days ahead recognize the yeasty smell of God’s kingdom in our own moment-to-moment existence. May we discover some treasure that we never knew existed hidden somewhere in the depths of your being.

And may we know the full depth and breadth and length and height of God’s love ... for it is in that love that we all hope. It is upon that hope that we all depend and upon which we build the very foundations of our lives. That is our calling and we want to *Make the Final Cut*.

Scriptures: Psalm 105:1-11
Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52