

GEMS: Gratitude, Excellence, Meekness, and Sacrifice in Athletics, in School, in Life

October 2, 2019

- **As Kids are Walking into the Gym**
 - Everyone make sure you are sitting next to someone that **you haven't talked to yet today**

- **Introduction**
 - I was **yelling at Shane** one day at swim practice when a former Seton Coach named **Rich Lowell** gave me a **quick lesson in charity**
 - He turned to me with the look that only Coach Lowell could give and said
 - **“How could you yell at Shane?”**
 - **“Yelling at Shane is like kicking a puppy”**
 - My interactions with Shane **haven't been the same since**
 - I heard from multiple sources that **Shane did a pretty nice job** at the opening assembly of laying out the **theme for the year: Charity**
 - To me **Charity is an Act of Love**
 - Charity is the **decision to do what's best for someone else** regardless of
 - what it costs you
 - how you feel about the other person
 - **John 15:13** – “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”
 - Charity is a **theological virtue**
 - Faith
 - Hope
 - Love
 - **And the greatest is love**
 - **Good choice Shane!**
 - When I'm done here, I hope you all will see **that the idea of Charity has played quite nicely** with what I want to talk to you about today
 - **Hard for me to believe** sometimes,
 - But I've **been coaching Seton Swimming longer than all of you have been alive**

- And in that time, **I've learned quite a bit about the value of high school sports** in a young person's life
- On the swim team, **we certainly value championships,**
 - but over the years **I've learned that the real value of Seton athletics** in general
 - and Seton Swimming in particular
 - Is the **Values we bring**
 - **To the pool**
 - To the field, and
 - To the court
 - Those values, **fully informed by our Faith**
 - Are what **give the competition meaning**
 - So that **makes them central** to all we do in **Seton Swimming**
 - In all we should do at **Seton School**
 - And in all we do **in our lives**
- There are **four (4) Values** I'd like to talk about today
 - On the Swim Team, we call them our **GEMS**
 - GEMS stands for:
 - **Gratitude**
 - **Excellence**
 - **Meekness, and**
 - **Sacrifice**

- **Gratitude**

- **As we should with all things, let's start with Gratitude**
- I know **a group** of people of whom I'm **totally envious**:
 - They live **rent free**
 - They have **chauffer** service
 - They have a **personal chef**
 - They have **laundry service**
 - They have nearly **unlimited access to electricity**
 - They have access to **all of the telecommunications technology** they need
 - They have **people whose lives have been dedicated** to their personal well-being,
 - who **love them deeply** and sacrifice for them every day
 - And their **only real responsibility** in the world is to **make themselves better**
- And you know the **amazing thing about this group** of which I'm so envious?
 - They **spend an awful lot of time complaining** about how bad they have it.
 - They go to this **great private school** too
 - The school has **lots of obvious flaws** for sure
 - The **building is old**, and the **heat doesn't always work** really well
 - Most of the teachers aren't **professionally "certified"**
 - Most of the **coaches are just parent volunteers**
 - You can't expect them to know anything
 - It has some **dumb rules** about what kind of jackets you can wear in the wintertime
 - And some of the **faculty seems to get a thrill out of passing out demerits**
 - But you know what?
 - I think **they forget about what makes their school so special**
 - They want so many spend hours talking about **how to fix the little things**, they forget that, in the process, **they might just break the big things**
 - Have you ever heard that old expression
 - **Be careful what you ask for, you just might get it?**

- I'm **no fan of Michigan football**, of course,
 - It's impossible to root for Michigan when you graduated from Notre Dame
 - But it is hard not to like **Michigan's Coach Jim Harbaugh**
 - He's a **devoted Catholic** who likes to **instill a sense of gratitude** into his players
 - When they gather in a huddle before the game,
 - He yells, **"Who has it better than us?"**
 - *Swim Team members in the audience yells "Nobody!"*
 - And the whole team responds, **"Nobody!"**
 - That is **true of us too**
 - **You are the group of which I'm so envious!**
 - You all have parents who love you
 - There are some unbelievably **great teachers** here
 - I know that **The Chief** isn't professionally certified to teach much less run a school
 - But she somehow has managed to overcome that handicap
 - How about **Mr. DiVietri?**
 - I love that guy!
 - Or **Mrs. Mirus**
 - I know some **seniors that she drove crazy**, but I also know they were lucky to have her
 - **They know it now**
 - And **you'll all know it too** when you hit your **first college writing class**
 - Even **I used to teach at Seton**
 - That's why I know that, while most of the **rest of us teachers can only dream of being as good as The Chief**,
 - **every teacher loves you** as much as she does
 - There **not here for the job**
 - Mr. Pennefather is not dealing with a **bunch of teacher's union members** who are only looking out for themselves

- There are here to
 - help you **develop your gifts** and
 - help you **grow in your faith**
- Many of you play on **sports teams** run by **dedicated volunteers** who would do anything for you
 - For those of you on the swim team, you saw **20 or 30 other teams** last season
 - How many of them have **6 volunteer assistant coaches** who show up at 6:04 a.m. for them?
 - Heck, **Coach Mulhern** and **Coach Ross** don't even have kids at the school anymore.
 - How many of those teams have a **Charles Seltman**, a **Bill Dealey**, a **Therese Griffin** and all of the other parents we have to help ensure that **you have fun meets in which to swim?**
 - I just love it when our **Coach Fioramonti** or **Coach Duran** take our **soccer teams** to one of these **“elite” schools** with their **paid coaches** and you guys **kick butt!**
- **So much to be grateful for**
 - Yet we still have **far too many dour Catholics** in this world, **including at Seton**
 - Think about **what we believe.**
 - **It's incredible** I know, but we believe that
 - God sent his only son
 - to die for us
 - to open the gates of heaven and
 - that even our suffering is redemptive
 - If we **actually believed** everything that we say we believe, **how could we be unhappy?**
 - That's **impossible for most of us humans**, of course.
 - But **one thing to remember**
 - **a dour Catholic does more harm to the work of evangelization than an outright unfaithful one.**

- At least the unfaithful ones don't confuse people by pretending that our Faith is something special
- So show your gratitude
 - It doesn't have to be **showy or overdone**
 - A simple model is **Teresa Bingham** who always seems to have a smile on her face and always says thank you
 - Or **Justin Fioramonti** and **Liam Kellogg** who never fail to come up to me **after every practice** to thank me.
- I want all of you to **try something for me** tomorrow
 - When you **finish a good class** or a good practice,
 - Go up to your teacher or our coach
 - Look them **in the eye**
 - **Shake** their hand firmly
 - Use their **name**
 - And say **“thank you”**
 - You will be amazed **how good YOU feel** when you do that
- Remember, **G is for Gratitude**
 - **“Who's Got It Better than Us?”**
 - **“Nobody!”**

- **Excellence**
 - **We focus on better. Good takes care of itself.**
 - When I was growing up, the most common question I got from my father was “**Did you do your best?**”
 - Like most kids, **I was good at some things and not so good at others**
 - **I wasn’t a particularly gifted** athlete for instance
 - I was a decent swimmer – 1:01 in 100 Back
 - Nothing like the kids on our record board behind you, but still OK
 - Part of the **attraction of swimming** for me was that I didn’t have to wear shoes
 - One of my **legs was an inch and a half shorter** than the other
 - So I **had to wear dress shoes** with a 1.5” rubber lift on my right shoe
 - Eventually, I was **able to wear Keds** sneakers because they finally figured out how to attach the extra rubber layers to the bottoms
 - But for **most of my time** growing up, I **had to wear dress shoes**
 - Even while playing **football**, baseball and basketball
 - In the same year and same area in which the movie “**Remember the Titans**” was set, I played left Offensive Guard and right Defensive Tackle in the **Fairfax County 80 lb. Football Championship game**
 - I played from the mostly black team from the Rt. 1 Corridor south of Alexandria
 - We played against an all-white team from Herndon, which was pretty country at a time before Dulles Airport
 - **We lost 6-0** on a running play that went right past my right Tackle position
 - Our middle linebacker, **Poovie Funderburk**, just couldn’t catch him
 - I watched the whole thing on my butt from behind the play

- There's a **longer version** of the story that **mirrors the movie** about the Titans
 - But the point is that I **played the game in dress shoes** with an inch and a half lift on one of them
 - And **no** one allowed me to use that as an **excuse**
 - All that mattered after the game was "**Did you do your best?**"
 - And I thank God for that
 - **Today** I'd probably be
 - **Considered handicapped**
 - Told I was a victim, and
 - **Allowed to not try so hard** on the field or court
 - But I don't recall experiencing anything but a **constant demand to do the best I could**
- That is why it is **so personal** to me **when I see one of you not trying**
 - If fact, it **drives me crazy** (as some of you have experienced)
- There are **effort things** and there are **talent things** - all things have an element of both
 - **Art** and creative writing tend toward the **talent things**
 - **Vocabulary quizzes** tend toward the **effort thing**
 - With **enough effort, there's no reason in the world not to get a 100%** on a quiz for which you have all of the questions and answers in advance.
- **Anything that is primarily a matter of effort is something that anyone can do.**
 - It may take more effort for some than others
 - As we learned in the parable, **God didn't give us all the same level of Talents**
 - As we also learned in that parable, He just wants us **to use our Talents** for **His** maximum possible benefit
 - **Even vocabulary**
 - **Everything you do** in your daily life, no matter how mundane, should be **done for the glory of God.**
 - **In other words,**
 - **Excellence is not merely compatible with Catholicism**
 - **Excellence is required by Catholicism**
- Almost none of you are going to **swim like Mairead Geiran**
 - Or some of the people on our record board – ever

- But that doesn't mean that you can't give your **best personal effort**
 - every time you hit the water
 - every time you take the field or the court
 - every time you enter a classroom
- If you do that, you will get better
 - **And if you keep getting better, the winning will take care of itself**
- I think you will also find that **getting the most from the gifts that God gave you**, no matter how many Talents that is, will be a **source of true joy**
 - Just ask **Addie-Quinn Kammerdeiner** or **Moira Haggarty**
 - I won't soon forget the **looks on their faces** after their swims at last year's **JV Invitational**.
 - That is **what true joy looks like**
- So that's all we can ask of you here at Seton
 - **"Did you do your best?"**
 - And **your answer** should always be **"Yes"**
 - The **next time** one of your teachers or coaches asks you **"Did you do your best?"**, you are going to say?
 - {make them say "Yes"}
- **Remember, E is for Excellence**
 - **We focus on better. Good takes care of itself.**

- **Meekness**

- I've heard it said at Seton that winning doesn't really matter
 - **Baloney!**
 - Some people have asked me if my emphasis on personal records means that I believe that myself.
 - I certainly don't.
 - And I certainly don't think that our faith teaches us that.
- Our faith does teach us to be "meek", however, many people completely misinterpret the term "meekness" in the way that Christ meant it.
 - According to **St. Thomas Aquinas**,
 - "meekness is a virtue which moderates the passion of anger according to the dictates of reason and calms the desire for revenge".
 - I don't know about you, but I didn't see anything in that definition that implies the capitulation or timidity often associated with the term "meek".
 - Quite the opposite in fact.
- To demonstrate the spiritual strength to be truly meek,
 - you need to be in complete control of your passions and direct them toward good
 - so called "righteous anger".
 - And to be truly meek in competition, you have to have the strength of character to turn your anger inward to maximize the gifts that God gave you
 - rather than trying to tear down your competition.
 - or even the referees!
 - So being meek actually requires incredible strength of character.
- If you really want to take "meek" to the next level, you compete in such a charitable way that you actually make your opponent better too.
 - Taken this way, if you don't try to win, you are actually doing your competitor a disservice!
 - That's why it is so dumb to automatically give the last place team the sportsmanship trophy!
- **Winner Matters!**
 - If you don't believe me, just watch the what is going on in our country these days
 - But now you can start to see why it matters in high school athletics too

- Last season, our **girls swim team beat** a very good **Trinity Christian** team for Seton's **25th straight conference championship**
 - Our girls medley relay **hadn't beaten their girls relay all season**, particularly when Trinity swam it with their two top girls
 - Scoring the likely outcome of the upcoming DAC Championship meet last season, **I knew that we had to win at least one** of the three **relays** to win the meet.
 - In the very first event of the meet,
 - **Caroline Griffin,**
 - **Mary Heim**
 - **Mairead Geiran,** and
 - **Mary Pennefather**
 - Dropped **1.29 seconds**
 - came within **.27 seconds** of the **DAC record**
 - and took **Gold**
 - **Game over.**
 - We **won the DAC** Championship meet by only 16 points
 - But that's **not even the best part of the story**
 - A **week later**, led by their two State finalists,
 - the talented girls from **Trinity Christian** went on to win the **VISAA Division II State Championship**
 - With **us cheering** them all the way
 - They even **copied our** blue and white striped **rugby shirts**
 - Maybe they **would have won it anyway**
 - But maybe they **worked harder all season in practice**
 - And maybe **they swam harder at States**
 - **Because they knew we were there trying to beat them**
- I think it is a great example of my definition of Meekness:
 - **Christian Meekness in athletic competition is not capitulation or timidity.**
 - **Christian Meekness is the spiritual strength to help your competitors over the bar that you raised by winning.**
- In other words, **we compete in such a way that we make our opponents better also**
 - And that **requires** us to try as hard as we can to win

- **Remember, M is for Meekness**
 - **We help our opponents over the bar that we raised by winning**
- **Sacrifice**
 - **We offer it up, we love all of our teammates**
 - I often think that we have an **advantage as Catholic athletes**
 - In many sports, **the winner is often the person willing to take the most pain,**
 - we have the ability **to offer our pain up** for the good of others.
 - But the kind of sacrifice on which I'd like to concentrate here is the **love of your teammates.**
 - **What does a good team look like?**
 - Some **characteristics**
 - Commonality of purpose
 - Mutual support
 - Encouragement
 - Identification with someone else's struggles
 - A **community** where everyone is **welcomed** and everyone is **loved**
 - **Not necessarily liked,** but loved
 - Love: when you sacrifice for the good of another
 - Don't **we all want a team** like that?
 - Don't we all **want a school** like that?
 - I love **Championship banners** as much as anyone, but that's **not my only metric for success.**
 - For those of you on the swim team, **another key metric** is:
 - **Do other kids want to hang out with us?**
 - Have we created an environment so **warm, welcoming and fun** that we have the **biggest team ever** next season
 - Do kids **want to hang out with**
 - **Your team?**
 - **Your class?**
 - **Well what's in the way? Let's start with a few definitions that you've probably already heard**
 - Calumny, Detraction and Exclusion
 - **Calumny**

- the making of false and defamatory statements in order to damage someone's reputation; slander.
- a false and slanderous statement.
- **Detraction**
 - a lessening of reputation or esteem especially by envious, malicious, or petty criticism : belittling, disparagement
- Calumny and Detraction are **just fancy names for gossip**
 - **Gossip**, especially vicious gossip, is a **variation of trying to kill someone**
 - Like trying to:
 - **Lessen** them
 - **Diminish** them
 - “Kill” them
 - It's a serious sin
- **Exclusion**
 - I recall a conversation I had in the Camarca's kitchen several years ago
 - A then very young little Camarca girl overheard me talking about some dynamics I was seeing on the swim team and asked
 - “Coach Koehr, what is ‘sclusion”?”
 - “Well Maria”, I said
 - Did you ever have a time when your friends were playing a game and they wouldn't let you play?”
 - “Oh yeah”
 - “Well how did it feel?”
 - “Oh, I didn't like it at all!”
 - “Well honey, that's ‘sclusion””
 - ‘Sclusion may be the **worst of the three**
 - At least when you are talking about someone negatively, you are **acknowledging that they exist**
 - Kids your age can often be susceptible to falling into little **cliques**
 - Small groups of close friends with whom you are comfortable

- To some extent, that's fine of course
 - we all prefer certain people over others
 - It only becomes a problem when the small group becomes **exclusive**
 - And **exclusionary**
 - You all might be thinking, that's **really interesting** Coach, but **why are you talking** to us about this?
 - **We don't act that way at Seton**, do we?
 - Well I'm happy to report that, **for the most part I think that is true**, but even on the **swim team, I see examples**:
 - I remember a time we were traveling on the **bus down to Richmond**
 - With loads of empty seats on the bus, a girl on the team complained to me that **"I have no friends to sit with"**
 - How sad
 - It drives me crazy when I see a **member of our swim team sitting out of the team area**
 - Alone **with their boyfriend** or girlfriend
 - Or with those stupid **ear buds** in, **isolating themselves from all of their teammates around them.**
 - **As if no one mattered** in the world except themselves
 - It drives me even crazier **when I see a young swimmer**
 - **Nervous about her event** because she's never swum in a pool so big
 - And **she's sitting all alone** because she **doesn't feel welcomed** into the groups of kids talking in the team area.
 - Or **the worst, leaving a younger teammate to finish a relay** after the older kids at the beginning of the relay have gone back to the team area.
 - Check out my blog post called **"Imagine"** on www.setonswimming.org

- **In contrast**, I still remember a 7th grade **Joey Dealey** **screaming his head off** at the end of the lane – all by himself – for a teammate
 - The picture is etched in my mind
- **Why don't we think this applies to us?**
 - **Two reasons** I think
 - First, when we hear the **Biblical stories** about the “Rich Man” and the “Poor Man”,
 - **we don't think of ourselves as “Rich” and we don't think of the people around us as “Poor”**
 - But that's not true
 - **Mrs. Mirus, we've missed the whole point of the stories!**
 - Remember **last week's** gospel about Lazarus, who sat outside the Rich Man's door and would have **gladly eaten the scraps** from the Rich Man's table
 - When the **Lazarus** died, he **went to heaven**
 - When the **Rich Man** died, he **looked up from the netherworld** and saw Lazarus
 - He begged Abraham to send Lazarus to **dip the tip of his finger in water** to cool his tongue
 - But it was **too late**
 - Well **who is the Rich Man** in that story?
 - **Just the people** “dressed in purple garments and fine linen”?
 - Or the people in the big houses and BMWs?
 - **No, it all of us!**
 - If you are a **better athlete** than someone else on the team, you are rich!
 - If you are a **better student**, you are rich!
 - If you are **from a strong family**, you are rich!
 - If you are a **good listener**, you are rich!
 - If you are a **good friend**, you are rich!

- **Any of you who are capable of thinking of someone other than yourself, you are rich!**

- **And who is the Poor Man?**
 - **Just the homeless people** “covered in sores” that very few of us ever really encounter in real life?
 - **No, it is the person next to us!**
 - It is the **boy afraid** to swim the **500 Free**
 - It is the **girl who never even realized** that she even could swim the 500 Free
 - It is the person **struggling with Algebra**
 - It is the person **struggling at home**
 - It is the person who might be **a little socially awkward**
 - Or the person **we simply don’t like all that much**
 - **It is all of us**
 - All of us are **poor in some way**
 - When you look at the people you admire, remember that **all you are really seeing is their highlight reel**
 - No one wants to be Poor in this sense, but **we all are in some way**
- **Another reason** that we don’t always think this applies to us is that we **forget the “other kind”** of sin
 - Just like there are **sins of Commission**, there are also **sins of Omission**
 - “For what I have done, and what I have failed to do”
 - It’s so easy to turn in on yourself
 - Raise you hand if you are **sitting next to someone who you hadn’t talked to today**

- Now raise your hand if you are **sitting next to someone who you hadn't talked to this year**
- **God put Lazarus** in the path of the Rich Man **to save him from his own selfishness.**
 - Sometimes the people God puts in our lives are as **unattractive as a Lazarus** covered in sores.
 - But what the Rich Man didn't realize is that **Lazarus was his ticket to heaven.**
 - The **Rich Man needed Lazarus** more than Lazarus needed the Rich Man
 - Lazarus was the **Rich Man's ticket out of the selfish Hell** he had created for himself.
- **We too need the Poor more than they need us**
 - We **need** that person that we **really don't like all that much.**
 - We **need** that **young, lonely and scared swimmer**
 - **To snap us out** of the selfish Hell we are creating for ourselves
- **Remember, S is for Sacrifice**
 - **We offer it up, we love all of our teammates**

- **Conclusion**
 - Let's wrap up here
 - **Fr. Sean Koehr** was telling me about a friend who went to work for the **Missionaries of Charity** in the Philippines
 - The Sisters **would wake him up** in the morning and say,
 - **“Come now Brother, let's go find Jesus”**
 - They **searched frantically** the poorest person they could find
 - When they **found him**,
 - they would say **“Hello Jesus”**, and bring him home
 - They searched **with the attitude, not that this poor man needed them**
 - They searched with the attitude that **they needed the poor man**
 - Fr. Sean was telling me how his friend was **struck by how they searched so frantically**
 - As if they were **hunting for a treasure**
 - **It was like they were searching for precious GEMS**
 - For Seton and Seton Athletics, **we know where to find** those precious GEMS
 - We find them in:
 - **Gratitude**
 - **Excellence**
 - **Meekness, and**
 - **Sacrifice**
 - So **“Come new brothers, let go find Jesus”!**

Not Used

- We were born in a **free country** where
 - any **advantages or disadvantages**
 - can be **negated or overcome**
 - by the **choices** you make
- And you enjoy a faith that tells us that even **our times of misery are redemptive**