

Anyone who has played sports can tell you about coaches they remember. There were some who may have seemed like they could care less about the sport. There were others who were so overbearing they'd forget about the person or be focused only on winning at any cost. But then there were those who knew the game so well inside out that despite being rigorous in what they demanded, helped both their team and individuals to become better not just at the game, but at life.

One of these coaches is a man who coaches youth in the inner city of LA, Keith Johnson.

One Saturday morning at the start of football season. Keith stood on a field in inner-city Los Angeles with a dozen eight and nine-year-old boys. He was trying to get them to run as slowly as possible. That's right. Slowly.

"We are going to do a slow lap around this field, staying together," he said.

"If someone lags, I want the fastest runners to stay with them. We run as a team. Got that? Now go."

The kids, brand-new recruits, took off. As he expected, the fastest kids streaked ahead, leaving slower runners behind. They returned sweating and out of breath.

“Okay,” he said. “We are going to do that again. And this time we are going to stay together. Understand?” There were some uncertain nods. “Okay, go.”

He still wasn’t happy.

“We can stay here all day until we get this right,” Keith said to the boys as they returned, stretched out in a straggly line. He motioned to the fastest runners. “You get in back and stay there. Now let’s get this right!” Faster nods. “Go.” And this time they did it.

Keith high-fived them and they high-fived each other. It was the first practice of the season and they hadn’t even touched a football yet. But they’d learned the most important lesson on his team.

“I don’t care how fast you run, how well you catch, how far you throw,” he said to the boys. “What I want from you is teamwork. To love and support each other. You give me that, and we’ve already won.”

Keith admits he does not look much like a football coach. He didn’t play as a kid and he does not play now. He needs a hip replacement and he sure does not run with his boys. But football is his life. As for why that is, he says it was because about 10 years ago, God showed him that the way to reach at-risk kids in L.A.—kids like him when he was young—is through what they love. And kids in his neighborhood love football.

So every summer and fall, in heat and cold, sun and rain, Keith is on the field, laying down drills, running plays and, most of all, encouraging boys on his team to set high standards and live with commitment and compassion.

Keith wasn’t always that way. He says if you’d known him when he was the age of the boys, you’d never in a million years have guessed that one day he’d be running his own nonprofit organization that fields a team of about 150 players from ages 5 to 14, not only coaching them but feeding them square meals after school and keeping a close eye on their grades.

You wouldn't have envisioned him as a grown man of deep faith, married for 30 years, with two successful sons. Most of all, you wouldn't have marked him as someone who tries to bring love and care to a neighborhood where both seem in short supply— because when he was his players' age, he barely knew what love was.

Keith grew up in Compton, south of L.A., raised by a single mom with three kids. His oldest brother had leukemia and his father went to prison. His mom tried to turn him over to his grandparents to raise, but they weren't up to it. So she put him in foster care, where he bounced from home to home.

Keith felt hurt and rejected and so he acted out. Like many kids in his community, he was often told, "You ain't going to amount to anything." And he believed it. By the time his grandparents finally agreed to raise him— they saw how chaotic his life was—he was an explosive 11-year-old determined to hurt the world before it hurt him.

His grandparents were old-school, churchgoing folk. Keith made life miserable for them for two years. At 13, he decided to join a gang. He set

off on his bike to ride to the gang's hangout. A block away, Keith stopped to let a truck pass.

It seemed to take forever. Suddenly he heard two voices in his head. One he knew all too well: You ain't going to amount to anything. The other voice was different. Larger and yet quieter.

Peaceful but impossible to ignore. Just go home now, it said. That was all. Before he knew it, Keith was pedaling back to his grandparents'. He burst in their door and sank into his astonished grandfather's lap. "I need help, Grand-daddy!" He cried. Something in his voice must have convinced him he meant it. "Hallelujah!" he sang out.

Keith began going to church with his grandparents. They found him a therapist, who taught him to stop blaming his parents and start taking responsibility for himself. He focused on two goals. To marry a woman he would be with for the rest of his life and to be a good father to his future children.

Thirty years ago, he accomplished the first of those goals when he married Karen, his high school sweetheart. They had two boys, Terrence and Solomon, now loving, responsible grown men. It was while his boys were playing youth football that God gave him the idea of using sports to reach at-risk kids.

Keith had gone to a Christian college and worked in ministry before becoming a program director for a group that served foster children. He connected with those kids because he had been one of them. But it was hard to get them to seek help. Foster parents would say, "I can't control him. He just doesn't want to go to your program."

One evening, as he was saying his prayers, Keith thought, My boys love playing football. What if I start a team and invite the foster kids I work with to join? All he knew about football was what he had learned coaching Solomon's team for a year.

But once he got kids on the field, he could talk to them about what really mattered. Karen had been the president of his sons' football league, so she knew the administrative side.

Providentially, a new league was forming in their neighborhood. Keith got its approval to start a team, the Falcons. Just a handful of players showed up. They got a whole lot more than football. He talked to successful people in the community and asked them what helped them stay on the right path. “God,” they told him. “Education.” “Self-respect.”

It was the old-school stuff his grandparents had tried to drill into him. “Those are your priorities,” he told the kids. “Not just winning.” Keith made them sign homework contracts and got regular updates from their teachers. If players’ grades slipped, he didn’t kick them off the team. Why would he want to lose the leverage he had? Instead, he got volunteers to supervise a mandatory homework zone. Watching their friends play while they did schoolwork persuaded most kids to shape up pretty quick.

Keith had trouble recruiting kids until he figured out some of the barriers keeping them from playing sports. Most football programs in the area charged \$300 a season—too much for many families. With grants and volunteer labor he was able to cut that amount in half.

Some kids felt they were too overweight or out of shape to play. Keith started a summer pre-season fitness camp. Others turned up hungry and lethargic.

Soon they were giving out food after each practice, expanding to a community-wide after-school nutrition program that partners with government agencies and has provided roughly 60,000 meals for kids throughout southern California. The bigger the team got, the more he realized he had to work with players' parents too. So many were just like his own parents—overwhelmed, unmarried, inexperienced, maybe even in jail. Keith set rules.

If a child is under eight years old, parents stay at practice—we don't babysit. No saggy clothes. No yelling. Karen and Keith started offering parenting advice sessions after practice. Not all parents came. But some did. He counted each one as a victory.

Today, Karen and Keith work side by side on the Falcons. She handles the administration and he handles the programming, the kids, coaches and volunteers.

He's learned more about football and even fielded some winning teams, including one that made it to regional playoffs a year after going 0-8. But stats are not where his heart is.

Here's why he loves his job: A few minutes after teaching his new recruits to run together, he was trying them out on a few plays. The boy playing quarterback noticed one of the other boys walking through the play, not running. "Hey, quit walking and hurry up!" he shouted.

"Whoa!" Keith cried. He bent down to the quarterback. "Son, did you say that in love or in hate? Think about the message you're sending your teammate. Say, 'I see you trying. I need you to push a little harder.' You understand?"

The quarterback nodded. When the play was done, Keith gathered the boys in a huddle. It was someone's birthday. The team and their coach surrounded him with their arms and sang "Happy Birthday." It was his my favorite play of the whole practice. So often these boys hear that voice he knew all too well growing up—"You ain't going to amount to anything."

At a crucial time in his life, he heard a different voice, a voice that pointed him to a different path than the one he was on. It is his hope and prayer that he can help other kids find that same path.

The woman in our Gospel today also hears two voices. One is from an angry mob who does not want to help her at all but condemn her. They tell her a similar message; she is nothing. A sinner, not holy like them. She must be killed. The other is from someone who offers her mercy, but also a new path to go down. The voice of a mob, and the voice of God in the Son.

Notice how Jesus contrasts to the mob in the Gospel. We are told that they bring out a woman who had been caught in adultery and make her stand in the middle as they prepare to stone her. It makes you wonder why are they so concerned about her business and how are they in a position to catch her in this act? Rather than want to help her, they want to condemn her. And they also want to trap Jesus. If He says “stone her” he’ll appear heartless and cruel; if He says “let her go” they can say He has no respect for the law. So he writes on the ground, perhaps as Augustine suggested the sins of each of the accusers, and says let he without sin cast the first

stone. And one by one they drop their stones. Jesus looks at her with love, saying He does not condemn her, but that she should go and sin no more.

When we look at this Gospel, it's a beautiful portrait of how grace can be so amazing, and of how it should work. It begins with God bursting in, like He did for Keith on his bike one day. But then it continues with a response to that grace as a person tries to grow in holiness, and then tries to help the world to do the same as Keith has done with his life.

As a starting point, we have to remember that God is always waiting to burst into our lives. And He will always love us and forgive us. The woman will sin again because she is human. But God's love will always be there. And on our part, we just have to open ourselves up to receiving it by trusting that. Sometimes I think the paradox is with this Gospel is that we can have the hardest time forgiving ourselves when we make mistakes, when we let others down, and want to throw the stone at ourselves, which we do through ruminating, through self-doubt or despair. But remember, no sin is exempt from the love of God - so we must open ourselves to it.

But grace also requires a response. Keith went to church. He became holier. He grew. Living the faith isn't just about showing up on a Sunday morning. It's a way of life. Hopefully over Lent we've been challenging ourselves to think about what we have done and failed to do that have caused us problems. Even after we confess and receive communion, there are still the temptations, and the inevitable struggles we have where we fall back into things, or the things we do that we ignore or justify but our conscience tells us are wrong. That's why we keep working on them, and don't ever give into the kind of thinking that says no one has to know about it, it's no big deal, just this one little thing, or it doesn't hurt anybody. We do not want to be scrupulous and think God has a computer of our good and bad deeds, but we want to grow daily. Keith challenges his team to run and learn to be a team long before they throw a football. He's a tough coach. But ultimately when the team trusts in him and listens to him, they succeed at something far more important than football. The same is true for us. Our Catholic faith is not just about ignoring the things that challenge us, but striving for perfection, which is why we examine our conscience and look for the places grace has to penetrate and how we respond. What do we battle? Whether it's our mannerisms, our struggles with sins of the flesh or things we shouldn't see on computers, how we treat people, how we parent

or treat others in the family, whatever it is, those areas for growth are there - that's why God gives us a conscience. So listen to it. And respond. Don't just be average. Become a saint!

Lastly, we do like coach Keith and evangelize. We too need to be the coach. We need to say to the world God loves you, but teach the world how to sin no more. You take the story of Abby Johnson. As I wrote in my bulletin column this week, several have told me about the film "Unplanned," the story of Abby Johnson. With the movie doing incredibly well despite major networks not wanting to run ads and social media not giving it a proper platform, it's clear that people are hungry for the truth. Johnson worked at Planned Parenthood for 8 years, rising through the ranks from volunteer escort, to clinic counselor to clinic director. Then it all changed when she was asked to assist in an ultrasound-guided abortion. What she saw was the ending of a human life on a screen. And she says it broke her. She was confronted with what she had been supporting for 8 years. She walked out of Planned Parenthood a week later, and could not stop thinking about the baby she saw just die in front of her. Today she is a pro-life speaker. She has an organization called "And Then There Were None" that helps abortion clinic workers who want to leave the industry. In her own

words, she relates to Saint Mary Magdalene: “I have also done my fair share of sinning. And I have also been forgiven much more than I deserve. I abused and betrayed women in the worst possible way. I convinced them to kill their children....It was Christ who changed me.” Indeed, He has, for that is what grace does. So what are we going to do to change the world? Sit around and complain? Go on social media and criticize and vent? Or actually do something. With respect to unborn children, right here from our own parish and others throughout the diocese, they are getting involved by peacefully praying at Planned Parenthood in Saint Paul in different shifts. I’ll be joining them too when our parish is there next Saturday. The point is in our world, there is so much blindness, whether you are talking abortion, or many other issues. It’s called the effects of original sin. But you and I cannot sit on the sidelines. We need to go out and do something about it. It means not being afraid to speak the truth whether at the office lunch table or gatherings with extended family. To engage in discussions and arguments. To be patient with others. To evangelize. To bring grace into the world so people can learn how to sin no more. Yes, there will be conflict. People don’t like to think about evil; its far easier to talk sports the weather, the pleasant stuff. But just as the cross, covered today for the start of the last two weeks of Lent, is not a piece of jewelry or a decoration

but a reminder of both what evil does and also the greater power of love, it's up to us like Newton, like Abby Johnson, to point out sin but also to wake people up to it's reality so they will sin no more.

Grace is indeed amazing, bu it's not cheap. Jesus uses the law of God to bring a sinner back to life. On a street in Jerusalem where a woman was dragged from a home; on a an LA street in the 60s talking to a 13 year old, and in an abortion clinic in 2008, two things met in each place: God's mercy, and the misery of people who had lost their way. But in each instance, mercy prevailed and sinners turned from their way by responding to the power of grace. May we follow their example as we encounter mercy, and let it transform us so we can go forth from Mass and help to transform the world to open it's eyes to sin and turn away from it.