Though you can debate who the greatest of all time is, it goes without saying that Michael Jordan is universally seen as one of the greatest players to ever play the game of basketball. And while certainly he had to practice and work tirelessly to improve his skills and stay at the top of the game, it's also safe to say that he also had a certain natural talent for the game, and some tools that God gave him that just needed to be developed. Over the years, he's become a household name using those skills to win titles and become a legend. But he also realizes that there is more to life than just the trophies, and as such has decided to also use what God has given him not just for himself, but for others. And here, I don't mean the fans who cheer on the Bulls, or even his teammates, but people who were impacted by him because he decided to use his gifts in ways that will have a lasting impact on people that is so much more than the stuff of sports trivia or stories, but rather that helped people to see hope and love.

Some years ago in Chicago, Bob Greene, who was a longtime reporter for the Chicago Tribune, covered a lot of the crime in the city. As he put it, as part of his work he had seen some of the darkest and unhappiest aspects of human nature. And this was beginning to get to him.

He writes that there were nights when he would go home from work and question the very nature of humanity, and wonder if there was any answer to the unremitting cruelty he was observing and writing about so often. Part of this had to do with a particular case he was covering. The case involved one of the worst crimes he had ever encountered.

A beautiful, bright-eyed, four-year-old boy named Lattie McGee had been systematically tortured over the course of a long Chicago summer. All that summer, his life dwindled agonizingly away in a closet, and no one knew he was there; no one heard his muffled cries. After his death, when the police discovered what had been done to him, Bob wrote column after column about the people who had murdered him. So many cases of impoverished children from forgotten neighborhoods get lost in the court system. Bob wanted to make sure that Lattie McGee received justice, or something close to it.

With all of the public interest in Lattie because of the columns, the story of his brother, whose name was Cornelius Abraham, did not receive as much attention. The same things that were done to Lattie were done to Cornelius too. Somehow he survived. He watched his brother slowly being killed and

was unable to stop the killers. Cornelius' brave testimony in court is what helped to convict them.

By the end of the trial, Cornelius had just turned nine. He was a thin, extremely quiet boy; with his little brother dead and his mother and her boyfriend in prison, he was living with other relatives. The two great loves of his life were reading and basketball.

In one of the columns Bob had written about Lattie, he had mentioned Cornelius' passion for basketball. Steve Schanwald, a vice president of the Chicago Bulls, had read the column and left a message at Bob's office. Though tickets to the Bulls' games were without exception sold out, Schanwald said that if Cornelius would like to come to a game he would be sure there were tickets available. Jim Bigoness, the Cook County assistant state's attorney who had delicately prepared Cornelius' testimony for the trial along with Bob took Cornelius to the game.

To every Chicago youngster who followed basketball, Chicago Stadium was a shrine. This young boy, once locked up and tormented and hurt, was now in a stadium to see his first Bulls game.

They walked down a stairway until they were in a lower-level hallway. Cornelius stood between Greene and Bigoness. Then a door opened and a man came out. Cornelius looked up, and his eyes filled with a combination of wonder and awe and total disbelief.

Cornelius tried to say something; his mouth was moving but no words came out. He tried to speak and then the man helped him out by speaking first.

“Hi Cornelius,” the man said. “I’m Michael Jordan.”

Jordan knelt down and spoke quietly with Cornelius. He made some jokes and told some stories about basketball and he didn’t rush. For a long time, the only adults Cornelius had contact with were adults who wanted to hurt and intimidate him. And now Michael Jordan was saying, “Are you going to cheer for us today? We’re going to need it.” He patiently waited for Cornelius to work up the courage to talk.

Jordan went back into the locker room to finish dressing for the game. Bigoness and Greene walked Cornelius back upstairs to the court. There was one more surprise waiting.

Cornelius was given a red shirt of the kind worn by the Bulls' ball boys. He retrieved balls for the players from both teams as they warmed up.

Then, as the game was about to begin, he was led to Jordan's seat on the Bulls' bench. That's where he was going to sit - right next to Jordan's seat. During the minutes of the game when Jordan was out and resting, Cornelius would be sitting with him; when Jordan was out on the court, Cornelius would be saving his seat for him. At one point late in the game Jordan took a pass and sailed into the air and slammed home a basket. And there, just a few feet away, was Cornelius Abraham, laughing out loud with joy.

Bob writes he wanted to thank Jordan for taking the time to be so nice to Cornelius. The meeting between them, he later learned, had been something that Jordan had volunteered for; he had been aware of the Lattie

McGee case, and when he had heard that the Bulls were giving Cornelius tickets to the game, he had let it be known that he was available.

After the game, in the locker room after the last sportswriter left, Jordan got up to retrieve his gym bag and head for home. As he walked towards the door of the locker room, he saw Bob and stopped. Bog said to him, “I just wanted to tell you how much Cornelius appreciated what you did for him.”

For a second, Bob writes that he had the strange but undeniable impression that perhaps this was a man who didn’t get thanked all that often - or at least that there were so many people endlessly lining up to beseech him for one thing or another that all he was accustomed to was the long file of faces in front of him wanting an autograph, a favor, a moment of his time, faces that would immediately be replaced by more faces with more entreaties. He stood there waiting, as if he was so used to ceaselessly being asked for things that he thought Bob’s thanks on Cornelius’ behalf might be the inevitable preface to petitioning him for something else.

When Bob said nothing else, Jordan said to him “That’s why you came back down here?”

Bob responded, “Well, I don’t think you know much today meant to Cornelius.”

Jordan responded, “No, I’m just surprised that you came back down to tell me.”

Bob said to him “My mom would kill me if I didn’t” with a smile. “She tried to raise me right.”

“Mine too” said Jordan with a smile.

They shook hands and he turned to leave and Jordan asked Bob if he came out to a lot of games. Bob admitted it was his first one, and Jordan said to him that he out to come back as he walked away.

Over the years, Jordan would donate millions to Friends of the Children, help those impacted by Hurricane Florence, become a Make-a-Wish

Ambassador, be involved in causes related to education, hunger, and wellness to the military; help combat illiteracy. He's also been vocal in his support against racism while at the same time speaking out for the police, In his own words, "I know this country is better than the racial divisions and divisive rhetoric, and I can no longer stay silent. We need to find solutions that ensure people of color receive far and equal treatment AND that police officers, who put their lives on the line every day to protect us all, are respected and supported…over the past three decades, I have seen up close the dedication of the law enforcement officers who protect me and my family. I have the greatest respect for their sacrifice and service."

Jordan is still a name that will always be synonomus with greatness on the basketball court. And his talents won championships and also brought joy to millions who watched him play the game at it's highest level. But what Jordan also realized is that while he was blessed with certain talents, they also needed to be used for other things too even greater than trophies. And a question for all of us is how do we use what God has given us, namely His grace and love. Do we claim it as something for our own, or do we use ourselves as a vehicle of grace for the whole world, making it the truly kind

of amazing grace that can work through us to bring so much good to the world.

One of the things we have to remember is that God gives us all grace through no merit of our own. Our Christian faith is not one of karma, where a person gets either something good or something bad coming to them based on their actions. Of course in real life sometimes a person is blessed for the good or punished for the bad; often as we know that isn't the case too. And there certainly will be judgment for us all where we are accountable for our actions. But all of us no matter how good inevitably sin and fail at various points in our lives. And God in His love for us decides to liberate us from that through this thing we call grace.

At first glance, it would seem this grace is given to only some. We see this in the Bible; God selected Abel over Cain; Abraham over Lot; Jacob and not Esau; the Israelites and not Egypt; king David but not King Saul. And we hear many times of the Israelites being the "chosen people." So is this to say that God loves some more than others? Not quite. Listen again to the words of the first reading: ***"The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, ministering to him, loving the name of the LORD, and***

becoming his servants—all who keep the sabbath free from profanation and hold to my covenant, them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." As the story unfolds, we see how God loves without exceptions. It's why Jesus choses Saul to become Paul and bring His message to the gentiles. That being said, God choses some to be special vehicles of grace. The Israelites are that instrument so through them, a very insignificant nation, God's glory can shine. Israel is chosen with a grace, or a gift, not to be hidden, but to be shared with the world.

That, ultimately, is what we see in the Gospel too. It's a tough Gospel; at best, Jesus seems to come across as a little tired or annoyed that this woman keeps bothering him. First He ignores her, then he says it's not right to give the food of the children and throw it to the dogs. It sounds worse than it is in our translation, as it was a term more like "puppy" used by Jews to refer to Canaanites and some other gentiles. But there's no way around it, it comes across as a rather cold interaction on the part of Jesus towards this woman. Really though, what He's doing is awakening her faith

and testing her a bit. He sees how she persists, perhaps challenging her a bit, and she passes this test. She understands that there is a uniqueness in how grace has been given to the Jewish people, and Jesus praises her for it, giving her what she wants.

Jesus has indeed come for the Jewish people, but it is also for the sake of the world. The great feast that was given to Israel is now meant to be, through Israel, for all of us.

And this leads me back to Mr. Jordan. Not all of us have the raw talent to become an NBA legend. But all of us do have grace, freely given. We are each given different talents and gifts. And we have to ask ourselves, are we going to use it for ourselves, or are we going to use it also for others? Are we going to use what we are given to glorify God?

Maybe you have discerned your vocation; I've felt God calling me to be a priest, and I can't see that changing. Perhaps you are married, and have kids. Or you are certain you are where you need to be in life with your career. That's great if you've got the discernment part down. But how are you living it out? As a priest, I've had to change and grow as a person, and

that will be true until the day I die. And odds are God will help me to make more changes to become finally perfected even after I die. But we have to look at how we are doing. For those who are married, they ask themselves how am I living out my vows and loving my wife or husband; am I reflecting Jesus who washed the feet of the apostles, or becoming a bit too selfish or expectant? For parents, it means they have to change as their children age, and as more children enter the picture remembering each child is unique, and they remind themselves they aren't perfect but grow as people, and need to make time for family. Or our jobs; do we do them just for money and ambition, or are we using our skills and talents to make others better, to provide for others and share what we've been given.

Second, as we try to do our vocation better and better in a way that God wants us to, we ask ourselves are we doing it just for ourselves, or for others? Do we make a difference? There is a joy that comes with being married; a person receives love from the other person. There is a joy that comes with being a priest too; besides being happy in my ministry, I have security in a place to live, and a salary that provides for my needs. And if a person goes to school and practices the trade they want, there is a happiness that comes from that. But in all that we do, it can be easy to

become focused on just ourselves. There are NBA stars that rack up stats but never a title because they play the game selfishly; and others with money and fame who end up like Charles Foster Kane at the end of “Citizen Kane”; wealthy and powerful, but alone in a mansion surrounded by their stuff, but not people because it was in the end just about them, not others. So are we using what we’ve been given for others and making them and the world better? The gifts that God has given us freely, the grace, it’s meant to be shared, which we do when we give of our time and talent; when we love freely without saying “whats in it for me” and when we help one another.

Lastly, are you open to the call within the call as Mother Teresa put it famously looking at her going from a teacher to the leader of a ministry for the poor? It’s easy to get comfortable or in a rut. But maybe now God is calling you to the next level and to do something even more. Perhaps its doing something more for your spouse or kids or parents. Maybe it’s a call to volunteer here at the parish or in the community like in coaching helping out at a charity. Maybe it’s time to take a new job or be open to a changing careers.

Years from now, people, save perhaps for Cleveland Cavalier fans, will still be watching Jordan highlights and talking about one of the greatest players to ever play the game. Years from now, people will still have Air Jordan sneakers. And no fan of basketball will forget the name of Michael Jordan. But for a young boy that evil could have destroyed, one encounter with a hero did so much to bring him so much more, and the charitable actions of Mr. Jordan and others like him have done so much good, all because one man decided there was more to life than the Larry O'Brien trophy and six rings, namely using what he had been given to bring joy to people who watched basketball, but more importantly to share what he had ben given and thus make the world a better place. What an amazing gift grace is that we can use to set the world free from darkness and evil. Let it shine through us, and use it not for ourselves but for the world to fill it with hope and love.