

In 1935 James Braddock won the world's heavyweight boxing championship by beating Max Baer. The following day Damon Runyon declared Braddock "the Cinderella Man."

In 2005 Ron Howard directed the movie, "The Cinderella Man," which received three Academy Award nominations and was a commercial success. The movie was based upon Jeremy Schaap's 2005 book of the same name.

Though it isn't depicted in the film as much, Braddock was also a man of deep faith.

He was the youngest of seven children born to his Irish-Catholic immigrant parents in Hell's Kitchen in New York City, the son of Elizabeth O'Tool and Joseph Braddock. As a young man he dreamed of playing football for Notre Dame but later jokingly admitted he "had the brawn but not the brains." As a kid, Braddock loved to fight; at 14 he knocked a schoolmate out and the nuns at his parochial school (St. Joseph's) "came to an agreement with Jimmy's father that he had probably had enough formal education" and he was expelled. His education ended in the sixth grade.

He had his first amateur fight at 17, and turned pro a few years later. On April 13, 1926, the 160-pound middleweight climbed into the ring at Amsterdam Hall in Union City, New Jersey and fought Al Settle, the fight ending in a draw. Critics noted that he wasn't the most skilled boxer, but had an iron chin that took extended punishment and wore his opponents out. Braddock steadily rose in the ranks to build a record of 33 wins, four losses, and six draws by November 1928 — when he knocked out Tuffy Griffiths in an upset that stunned the sport.

James J. Braddock lost his next fight but won the following three. He was now one bout away from challenging Gene Tunney for the title. He had to defeat Tommy Loughran to do so, however. He not only lost that fight on July 18, 1929, but fractured the bones in his right hand — and would spend the next six years fighting for his life.

Besides being dubbed the Cinderella Man by Runyon, another era sports writer, Grantland Rice, dubbed Braddock the Miracle Man. It all happened in the space of a year. Associated Press sports writer Edward Neil described Braddock's rise and fall in a 1935 article in the Washington

Evening Star. As a fighter Neil relates, Braddock “came up the hill with tremendous speed, and went down just as fast.”

Breaking his right hand cause his career to sputter. Over the next five years he fought 36 times and lost 16 of them—winning only three by knock outs.

On top of that in 1929 he lost his life-savings when his bank failed in the stock market crash which inaugurated the Great Depression. At the time there was no FDIC bank depositor insurance. Soon thereafter his investment in a New York City Taxi Company also went south. He was suddenly busted.

Desperate to make a living, he fought fights with broken ribs, a broken collar bone and broken hands— “he was getting licked so regularly that the experts shook their heads [in disbelief],” wrote Neil. On one occasion he deliberately broken his hand in a fight “so that [fight] doctors could reset it [because he couldn’t afford the \$1450 to do it in a hospital],” added Neil. He’d have 20 losses over a period of few years, a far cry from where we was.

By 1933, he had married Mae Fox and had 3 kids who he tried to spend every moment providing for. He gave up on fighting after a bout on September 25, 1933 when he again broke his hand. With three kids and a wife, Braddock was forced to take day work as a stevedore on the New Jersey docks. The family lived in a cramped basement in Woodcliffe, New Jersey. Things got so tough he went on relief at \$24 a month. He was unable to train, dreaming of fighting one day again, but, according to Neil, “[he] saved carfare [by] walking three miles...to the [New Jersey] docks each day.” If he couldn’t find work on the Jersey docks, he walked another two miles to the West New York docks looking for work there. He walked between 10 and 12 miles a day looking for work. Unbeknownst to him, the walking kept him in boxing shape—looking for work and working the docks prevented him from the ordinary gym work outs typical to the boxing game. If he wasn’t on the dock, he’d clean basements, shovel driveways, sweep floors. His electricity was cut off and a friend loaned him \$35 to help out; he paid him back but was soon broke again.

All of this was taking a toll on him; he was wondering where was the way out, how could he find hope for the future again? In these moments, his Catholic faith supported him in this time of despair. In moments of despair,

Braddock turned to the priests of St. Joseph of the Palisades [who]...told him to keep his faith, that God will provide him with the strength to carry on.

At the same time his sore right hand gradually healed. But the injured hand forced him to rely on his left hand for lifting railroad ties and heavy bales which only served to strengthen his left hook—again unbeknownst to him.

Finally, at age 29 the down and out Braddock got a fight against Corn Griffin, a fighter who was being hailed as a heavyweight contender—he needed a sucker fighter to show off on. With only two days of training Braddock won by a TKO in three rounds. Tanaka relates “his left hand, previously an almost useless weapon, was now...as powerful as his right.”

After Griffin, Braddock got two more fights—winning both. Suddenly he found himself signed for a fight against the worlds heavyweight champion—Max Baer.

With an advance he received to train, Braddock paid back \$367.24 in relief he had received (13 months 'worth) from the New Jersey Emergency Relief Administration. The unnecessary payback was widely reported by the Associated Press and only added to the “Cinderella Man’s” image and

reputation. He was inspired by the Catholic Worker's Moment that helped the homeless and hungry and wanted to give something back; later on he'd make frequent donations to various Catholic Worker Houses. He also fed homeless guests with his family. A practicing Catholic, Braddock was a Knight of Columbus as well.

One writer summed him up best saying: "[Braddock] captured America's imagination. In Braddock, Depression-weary Americans saw a family man who, like them, struggled against common enemies of unemployment and poverty, and he did it with grace and courage."

With his winnings in the Baer fight, Braddock's wife, Mae, told the Associated Press she hoped "maybe we can have a nice one-family house." At the time they were living in a "hot...third floor apartment in the Palisades of the Hudson." She got her wish when they purchased a home in North Bergen, New Jersey.

Two years later Braddock lost his championship to Joe Louis. To insure his future economic well-being the fight deal required that Braddock get 10% of Joe Louis 'winnings for the rest of his life. Louis retained his title for the

next twelve years. With his winnings Braddock invested his money in heavy construction equipment, which he operated at various construction sites throughout the New Jersey-New York area.

He died in 1974 and is buried in Mount Carmel Catholic Cemetery in Tenafly, N.J. He was 69. His “loving and understanding” wife, Mae, died in 1985 at the age of 79. She is buried next to her husband.

The story made a great movie with Braddock played by Russel Crowe, because everyone loves an underdog story. But the deeper thing is for all of us, we want happiness. We want to “make it” in life. And what we find is that life can give us so much; the ultimate happiness being with God forever and becoming a saint. Braddock got himself back on his feet and achieved his dream as a fighter; but at a deeper level he wasn’t letting fame consume him. He knew his real vocation was a husband, a father, and he used his time on earth to try to make this world a better place. But doing this required humility. He didn’t wallow in pity. Rather he played the hand he was dealt, he didn’t give up, and ultimately when he was back on top, he didn’t let the success go to his head but continued to help people in need.

The greatest of sins is pride, because this is the sin of the devil; he wanted to be greater than God, not God's servant or angel. Pride can sneak into our lives. We can think we're great and don't need to improve. We can forget our need for God. We can think ourselves superior to our spouses, our kids, our parents. It's often a sneaky sin. But what we have to remember is all we have is a gift from God, and God love us so much, but wants us to remember that too on our own, we will ultimately be lost. Only when we reach out to God, to others can we find the path to unlock our true potential.

Our first reading this week tells the story of Naaman the Syrian; he's a powerful general of the Syrian Army, which is at odds with Israel. He's become a powerful man well known and respected among his troops. But he has a flaw, and this is leprosy. Kings 2 Kings 5:1 tells us "valiant as he was, the man was a leper." Surely this would have shocked him; he probably thinks here am I this powerful general, and will people now look at me and think less of me and treat me as an outcast? Will this cost me my position?

Thankfully Naaman, like Braddock, didn't let his ego go to his head. Rather he's open to the voice of God in how it comes to him.

Note there is no moment of an angel coming to him. Rather a slave girl, who was captured in a raid his troops made into Israel, says in 2 Kings 5:2 "If only my master would present himself to the prophet in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy!" Naaman arranges with his king for a meeting to be held, but the king of Israel throws him out when he goes to see him, thinking the king of Aram was setting him up for trouble. Naaman then goes with his "horses and chariot" we are told to the door of Elisha's house; Elisha though won't even come to the door. Rather he sends him a message from within go wash and 7 times in the Jordan.

Naaman is pretty frustrated and about to give up. He's thinking I arranged for this meeting, I come all the way here, and this guy can't even come to the door? He's about to leave and give into ego, thinking we have cleaner, better rivers at home. But his servants talk some sense into him and say you've come all this way, don't give up and be an idiot - listen to the man. So he does, and we are told in 2 Kings 5:14 "His flesh became again like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean." He then takes some dirt back

with him to his homeland to worship God, and thanks Elisha who wouldn't accept the gift, but has him take the dirt back with him.

It's a great story that goes to show you when we have a little bit of humility in our lives, really good things can happen on our journey to happiness. In our lives, there's a few things we can do to make sure this happens all the time.

One is to pray daily. We are not gods; but as humans we've always tried to become god since the time we took the apple. When we pray, we realize we have dependence on God and need Him in our lives. We come to Mass to be nourished by Jesus' Body which helps us to persevere and to avoid sin, and to make good choices. We recognize we need God journeying with us, and that He is there to help us.

Related to this, as we pray, do a good examination of conscience. The Church invites all who say the Liturgy of the Hours at the end of the day, before Night Prayer, to make an examination of how the day had gone; what did we do well, but what could we have done better. This is a great idea to do at the end of the day, because as we go along, we sometimes

can forget we are always work in progress. Mom is no longer asking “did you do your homework” or “did you take out the trash” or “did you clean your room?” In all our lives, we can do things better. Braddock had a great right hook, but he had no idea he had the potential to have a powerful left hook too and could go from a good fighter to a great fighter. So it is with us. When we listen to our conscience, we can say “yeah, I need to do better as a member of this family” or “this stuff is sneaking up in my life again and has to go” or “I haven’t been praying or going to Mass like I should.” Our conscience is there to keep us humble and to help us grow, but we need to listen to it.

Third, do you, like Naaman, listen to the slave girl or the people who come to you? Maybe it’s a young child like the slave girl who tells a parent mom, why don’t we go to church every weekend or how come you are using words you told me not to use? Or perhaps a friend who is concerned about our demeanor, or a spouse who sees us becoming more irritable or becoming more distant in the relationship. It’s hard to listen because inside of us like Naaman is that person who wants to give into ego and say I’m not going to bother and this is ridiculous what do they know, but Naaman had

some sense talked in to him and we need that too. God gives us people to help us, so we need to listen to them.

Fourth, we need to, like Naaman, admit we can't do it on our own. Again, we need God. We need other people. He could not hide his leprosy, and we can't hide ours either. An addiction to sensualism or sins of the flesh; to alcohol; to greed; to fear of what others may think of is. Pick your sin; all of are lepers. But when we say "God show me the way" and listen to the people in our lives, we can also become clean.

Fifth, we do the work, which is often humbling. Braddock walked miles each day to work that kept him in shape; he worked the docks using his left hand and arm that grew stronger. He didn't get back on top overnight, but it took years. The same is true as we strive to grow in holiness. You recognize a flaw or something you want to do, and then have a fall; well you go to confession and pick yourself back up by reaching out to God. Or you realize hey this is hard doing this work for my family, working hard at school, or giving up something that I really enjoyed but now realize was destructive and diminishing me as a person, but I got to keep at it.

And lastly, we maintain our humility throughout our lives like Braddock and like Naaman who wasn't just cured but brought the land back to give thanks to God. The 10 are cured in the Gospel knowing they need God - and we echo that too saying "Lord Have Mercy, Christ have Mercy, Lord have Mercy" as we start Mass. But one returns to give thanks but this is also an act of humility too; he's not just cured and takes off but returns to the one who healed him. How about us? We need to keep going back to God. We need to then go out and help others be cured too, and daily grow in holiness.

Every time I offer Mass, I wash my hands and pray "Lord, wash away my inequity, cleanse me of my sins," because it's a reminder to me as the priest I am unworthy do do what I do at this altar, but God loves me and wills I be made clean. And every time I hear confessions, and go to them as a penitent, I'm reminded of my own need for ongoing conversion and cleansing too. Like you, I am a leper. But when we make friends with our shadows, when we go through the work of trying to grow in holiness and grace, we, like Naaman, will find what we are looking for. So let's let go of our ego and our pride, seeing the real person inside that God sees and

looks at with love and mercy, and working with Him become the people we know we can become.