

So, in case you haven't noticed, there's been a bit of a tournament going on, involving sixty-eight college basketball programs from across the country. Except, in about ten hours or so, four will remain. But, the most mind-blowing number, is that tens of millions of pieces of paper and forms online have been filled out by people, like myself, trying to predict the winner of each of the sixty-seven games. And, in the last week alone, tens of millions of times over, people, like myself, have been proven undeniably wrong. Nevertheless, what people call this "March Madness" of it all, has proven to, at least, serve as a desperately needed distraction for the despicable news that broke out on far too many college campuses all over the nation.

Again, in case you haven't heard, filthy rich parents used their financial means to help their children get into college (as if they didn't, already, have enough of an advantage). Not only were university admissions personnel bribed for certain students to gain entry into the, supposedly, prestigious academic institution. Some SAT scores were doctored. Some parents even paid other people to take the test for their children. The integrity of schools like USC, Yale, Georgetown, Stanford, Texas, just to name a few: severely compromised, to put it mildly.

Of course, this does not represent the incredible work done by the brightest of professors shaping students for generations to come, plenty of researchers behind the scenes who will improve the basic health care circumstances of us all, not to mention far too many hard-working parents who did absolutely everything the exact right way in order for their child to receive an education in whatever field they so choose to spend their adult life in making the world a better place. Those best of heart-warming stories will not receive quite the media frenzy as the scandal that has erupted in the last few weeks.

One of the greatest examples happened not all that long ago. There was a boy named Bo Paske, who was eleven years old, at the time, and a student at Montford Middle School in Tallahassee, Florida. Bo had been diagnosed on the autism spectrum. And while he ate lunch in the school cafeteria, he often did so alone. His mother, Leah, at one point, wrote this:

*[I] have feelings of anxiety for him, and they can be overwhelming if I let them. Sometimes I'm grateful for his autism. That may sound like a terrible thing to say, but in some ways I think, I hope, it shields him. He doesn't seem*

*to notice when people stare at him when he flaps his hands. He doesn't seem to notice that he doesn't get invited to birthday parties anymore.*

*And he doesn't seem to mind if he eats lunch alone. It's one of my daily questions for him. Was there a time today you felt sad? Who did you eat lunch with today? Sometimes the answer is a classmate, but most days it's nobody. Those are the days I feel sad for him, but he doesn't seem to mind. He is a super sweet child, who always has a smile and hug for everyone he meets.*

Then came a day when a bunch of Florida State Seminole football players, as part of a community outreach program (one of countless many from colleges all over our country that go massively unnoticed), and these incredibly popular athletes came into the school cafeteria. One, Travis Rudolph, a star wide-receiver, noticed Bo sitting by himself, yet again. Rudolph made the simple, but most heart-warming powerful decision, to sit across from Bo, and started eating pizza as if it was just a normal human thing to do.

We cannot overlook the first part of the Gospel this morning. Yes, the heart-warming parable of the Prodigal Son is not just Good News for us, but Great News for our relationship with God. But let's not forget what drove the

Pharisees absolutely nuts about this Gospel-living Messiah: he ate with sinners, with the ritually unclean, with people ridden with infirmities, with people just like Bo.

Because, it's not just about sitting down and eating something with a person. It's about opening yourself up for conversation to ensue. It's about opening up the possibility that you, actually, care about the person across from you, just enough to listen about their life. It's becoming vulnerable, that your story may just come out too. It's about being on the same basic level of humanity: of needing nourishment to live, of needing some kind of, even, the slightest form of care and concern from another human being. It isn't so much about the food that is set before us. It's about the words shared across a table. It's about looking into someone's eyes as if they are, indeed, worth a holy something. Jesus, from the highest of the heavenly realm, made a simple, but most earth-shattering, turn-over-all-the-expectation-tables, and sat down right next to us in whatever sin, whatever sickness, whatever makes us different from anyone else. Jesus pushed all that drastically aside and decided to cozy right up against our broken humanity.

Bo, soon enough, became a celebrity in his middle school, to say the least. There weren't enough seats at his table for those who wanted to sit beside him, just because a young man that most of us would stereotype as a selfish and greedy future professional athlete decided to have a meal with him.

Bo's mother wrote:

*This is one day I didn't have to worry if my sweet boy ate lunch alone, because he sat across from someone who is a hero in many eyes. Travis Rudolph thank you so much, you made this momma exceedingly happy, and have made us fans for life!*

So, finally, in case you haven't noticed, we are part of such a holy encounter with a meal we often take for granted. But at this table that we call Holy Communion, Jesus cozies right up next to us every single time: with whatever sin or fear or worry we bring to the table. No matter what, there is nothing that will push Him away. Not only will He serve Himself up, not only will He stand right next to us when we take in His Gospel-living body, but He will walk right out those doors with us throughout this life and for eternity. Because, in case you haven't noticed, even in this season of Lent, Christ is still risen indeed. Amen!