Years ago, a friend of mine coached a basketball team for young kids.  I can’t remember the exact age but it was in the first and second grade range.  Because they were so young he spent a lot of time on very basic things – dribbling, tying your shoes correctly, passing the ball, not licking each other and so on.  It all seemed reasonable enough until one day an irate father came in berating him for wasting his time on such rudimentary things rather than teaching the kids how to win.  I am not sure how he hoped they would win if they did not know how to play the game, but somehow this all made sense in his mind. Winning existed independently of the fundamentals and rules of the game. And as absurd as this may sound, I don’t think this father was alone in his convictions.   We seem to have a lot of people these days interested in winning without caring about how the game is played.  This may seem an oversimplification but I think one of the points of Christianity is getting people to care about how the game is played.  And I hope by now that you realize I am not talking specifically about the game of basketball but rather about the way we go through life.  Do we act in ways that are in accordance with God’s will or do we take shortcuts when it might be advantageous to us?  Do we try and tell the truth except when the truth might show that we did something wrong and put us in an uncomfortable situation or do we tell the truth regardless of how it may affect us?  The thing with rules is sometimes it works out well for us and sometimes it does not.  And part of the reason for this is that we live in a sinful world and in a sinful world right behavior can sometimes be a disadvantage, but that fact does not make right behavior optional.

                This morning in the Book of Daniel we read, “But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”  I want to take a particular focus on that last sentence and the two components contained therein.  First it is about leading.  Which is all well and good but it is the second part that makes it mean something because as you know leading in and of itself is neither inherently good nor bad.  It is what you are leading people to that is important. And those who will shine like the stars forever and ever are the ones who lead others to righteousness.

At first or perhaps even second blush this passage might seem totally unrelated to my basketball introduction but let me explain what I mean. The thing is being righteous and winning are not necessarily related. Rather righteousness is another way of talking about following the rules of the game. Righteousness if you want to get all Oxford English Dictionary about the word has to do with conforming to the divine law. In other words when we are righteous, we follow God’s rules, we delight in his will and walk in his ways. And here is the hard part when we follow this divine law or God’s rules or whatever you want to label it, we are not necessarily always going to win, at least not in human terms. In fact, sometimes things might go terribly wrong. Let me give you an example, which may be a little extreme but as fellow Episcopalian General George S. Patton said, “When I want it to stick, I give it to them loud and dirty.”

It is the story of Maximilian Kolbe who was born in Poland in 1894. When Maximilian was 12, he had a vision of the Virgin Mary. In this vision she asked him if he would be willing to devote himself to a pure and holy life, which seems straightforward enough. But then she asked something else of him, she asked if he would be willing to wear a red crown, which he took to mean she was asking whether or not he would be willing to die as a martyr for his faith. Would he be willing to follow the rules that far? Maximilian agreed and accepted both challenges that Mary set before him. A few years later he was ordained as Franciscan friar and eventually earned a Ph.D. in philosophy. During the 1920s and 1930s, he traveled quite a bit, building a monastery in Japan and another in India. Poor health forced him to return to Poland in 1936, not the best time to be coming home. When the Nazis invaded in 1939, he was given the chance to have enhanced rights and privileges in exchange for signing a document recognizing his German ancestry but he refused. He also refused to give up publishing religious texts. And it was these texts that would draw the attention of the Nazi authorities because he would not compromise his beliefs. He would not deviate from the pure and holy life he had agreed to live. As a result of his submission to a higher authority the texts he published were critical of the Nazis. And as is the case with authoritarians the world over, criticism is not tolerated and so in February of 1941, his monastery was shut down and he was arrested by the Gestapo. Within a few days, he was transferred to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp where he was given the number 16670. In the camp, Maximilian again refused to abandon his faith and devotion and live in a way more pleasing to his Nazi overlords, but instead he carried on serving as a priest to his companions. This also angered the authorities at the camp and so he received regular beatings. In July of 1941 ten prisoners had succeeded in escaping from the camp, which of course angered the administrators of the camp. In an effort to discourage further prison breaks the guards picked ten prisoners to be starved to death in an underground bunker. When informed of their fate one of the prisoners singled out for this barbaric death cried out that he had a wife and children. At this point Maximilian intervened and offered to take the place of this condemned man. His offer was accepted and he was thrown into the bunker to slowly and painfully die. A man who was employed at the camp later recalled that Maximilian led the condemned men in prayer. In all he lasted two weeks, and was the last of the prisoners to die. In fact, the guards finally had to give him a lethal injection to kill him. Those who witnessed his last moments say that he accepted this final injustice with good grace and serenity. He was canonized in 1982 where Pope John Paul II declared him "The Patron Saint of Our Difficult Century." He story does end on a happy note. The man whose life was spared was a Polish Army Sergeant named Franciszek Gajowniczek (Fran chee sek Gow os ski). He survived Auschwitz and lived to be 93 years old, dying in 1995. During a 1994 visit to St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic Church of Houston, Texas, Gajowniczek told his translator Chaplain Thaddeus Horbowy that "so long as [I have] breath in [my] lungs, [I] consider it [my] duty to tell people about the heroic act of love by Maximilian Kolbe."

Maximillian could have stopped at any point in his journey and survived. He could have won by earthly standards but like Hebrew national Hot Dogs he answered to a higher authority. And his witness like what we read about today in Daniel, Maximillian is one of those “who lead many to righteousness.” His witness is to something higher and more eternal. And for that we say thank you to him but also want to commit ourselves to live lives as exemplary as his. Lives that do not look to winning in the short term but to being God’s own this day and forevermore.