

Fabulous Dust!

*Sermon preached by The Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, Director of Crossroads Community Services,
at the nine o'clock service, March 13, 2011: The First Sunday of Lent.
Based on Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11.*

I have never been able to attend a proper celebration of Mardi Gras or Carnival. I always have someplace to be the next day—it is one of the occupational hazards of priesthood—but someday I will. And when I do, I hope I get to go to Carnival in Brazil. I have always been drawn to the celebration of Carnival in Brazil by the colors, energy, and music. My interest in Carnival in Brazil was heightened by a Saturday profile in the New York Times about one Brazilian man, Silvio Botelho, and his connection to Carnival.

Mr. Botelho described his childhood as "very humble, or to put it more bluntly, poor." But poverty helped him to appreciate the creative potential of simple materials. His "amusements as a kid were to play with things found and recycled" he said and noted that he "always felt connected in some way to arts and crafts, whether it was drawing on paper or making sculptures out of pieces of wood or clay." When Mr. Botelho was 13, he became the apprentice of a local designer of Carnival masks. His father, an appliance salesman, was not pleased because he wanted his children to become doctors or lawyers. He didn't take drugs or drink, but his father would mock and ridicule his interest in Carnival, Mr. Botelho recalled ruefully. "He thought I would never be able to make a living from Carnival. He used to say to me, 'Are you planning on eating only once a year?'"

Today, eating is hardly a problem. Mr. Botelho designs giant puppets (some standing more than 20 feet high and weighing more than 60 pounds) that are so popular he gets requests for them year round. His fame for this elaborate craftsmanship has spread throughout Brazil and beyond. He has been invited to show his work in Argentina, Cuba, France, and the United States.

In 2003, the year before the article appeared, the most popular Carnival masks in Brazil had been Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden but Mr. Botelho refused to portray either of them, stating, "Negative forces gain strength and energy when they are let loose. I don't want to criticize people for the wrong things they do, because that is something that ought to be forgotten, not mentioned." Mr. Botelho prefers to reproduce images of local celebrities, like a fondly remembered waiter who died in 1997, a coconut vendor, a singer, and a radio soccer broadcaster.

Lent is a time of penitence and it is too easy to celebrate the negative in our own lives and those of others. It is important that we recognize the bad things we do, for it is the first step in reconciliation; and it is important that we recognize the forces of evil in our world, for it is the first step in overcoming injustice. But it is just as important that we do not celebrate the bad in ourselves or the evil in the world.

I want to tell you two stories to illustrate the point. The first story is the story of the careless driver. One day as I was riding my bicycle a car cut me off and zipped into a parking space. To avoid being hit I swerved toward the curb and barely missed hitting a tree by falling over. The careless driver got out of his car and began telling me that I should have been more careful. "Didn't you see the turn signal?" he asked. To be honest I did not—perhaps because he was already next to me when he saw the parking space and decided to turn in without looking, and I was not in a position to have observed his turn signal. He then said I must have been going way too fast. Now to be honest, this is one of those things I would like to believe was true (after all, I do want to have legs of steel); but let me assure you I am not there yet. He refused to

give me his name and phone number, the police were called and they took down all the relevant information, and we went our separate ways.

The second story is the story of the faithful friends. One day as I was riding my bicycle a driver cut me off and zipped into a parking space. To avoid being hit I swerved toward the curb and barely missed hitting a tree by falling over. My friends who were with me and saw the whole thing stopped; and, after making sure I was ok, began talking with the driver on my behalf so that I could check out my bike. When she became unreasonable and refused to provide even her name and contact information as required by law, they called the police and waited with me until the police arrived. My friends then stayed with me the whole time and pulled me all the way back to the George Washington Bridge. (One bit of bicycling lore you may not have thought about is that the cyclist in front works harder than those following as he or she is cutting an aerodynamic path for those following.) And so my friends took the front and pulled me on a very windy cold day all the way back to the bridge.

Which story would you rather hear? The story of the careless driver or the faithful friends. When we talk about the importance of celebrating the positive rather than the negative, it is important to note the positive story should not ignore or delete the negative. The driver did cut me off. There is no way to get around it. But do I want to celebrate and remember the careless driver or the faithful friends? It is a question of emphasis.

It is important to celebrate local heroes, turning them into celebrities. It is like the fertilizer the gardener gives the tree. By focusing on the positive and celebrating heroes we help to shape a world where good things and great people thrive. This happens in two ways. First, by celebrating the good that people do, we provide a powerful form of acknowledgement or appreciation. Without appreciation and acknowledgement human beings wither like plants without water. And so by celebrating the great things that people do and the good people who do great things, we appreciate them. The second way in which celebrating great things and good people helps to shape the world we live in is by holding up great things and good people as examples and encouragement to us all.

The Hebrew scriptures talk about humanity created in the image and likeness of God. The Christian scriptures talk about humanity as children of God. Clearly we are not puppets, and yet we are dust and to dust we shall return. But we are marvelous dust, wondrous dust, even fabulous dust. For we have been endowed with the ability to know, to think, and to create. Created in the image and likeness of God, we call forth creation and create the world we live in by the stories we tell. We tell stories about ourselves and we tell stories about others and then we live within the stories we tell. Let's tell stories that create worlds where everyone can live. Where everyone can practice a vocation without ridicule or shame, where everyone takes responsibility for their actions, and where all can be heroes.

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write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022,
or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.*