



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## Things Done and Things Left Undone

*Sermon preached at the twelve o'clock service, February 13, 2013*

*The First Day of Lent: Ash Wednesday*

*Based on 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

Last week on Facebook, I read a story of a man who committed adultery. It seems that after several months he decided that he had had enough of living a double life, and so he approached his wife and told her that he wanted a divorce. He made what he thought was a generous offer of the house, the car, and one-third of the value of his company and told her that he just didn't love her anymore. She became angry and tore up the paper on which he had written his conditions. She then said she would be happy to grant his request for a divorce without any payment if he would meet two conditions. First she wanted to postpone all discussion of dissolving their marriage for exactly one month. Their son was preparing for exams and she wished to spare him the discussions of their broken marriage until his exams were over. The husband readily agreed.

The second request was that for each day of the month the man who had committed adultery had to pick up his wife and carry her in his arms out of their bedroom just as he had carried her in on their wedding day. In order to keep peace for the month the husband agreed to this unusual request. The first morning they were a bit awkward, for you see they had fallen out of the practice of intimacy. And as the month progressed the task became easier. The man reported that his wife even seemed to be lighter or maybe he was becoming stronger from performing the task. He soon began to notice the clothes his wife was wearing, her perfume, how gracefully she had aged, and he began to love her all over again. By the 30th day, he was a changed man. He told the other woman that he no longer planned to get a divorce and was ending the affair. He returned home with roses for his wife and a card that read "I'll carry you out every morning until death do us part." The only problem was that the note was too late. She had died that very morning. For you see the wife, without telling her husband, had been battling cancer and knew her end was near even as the husband had announced his affair.

I have repeated this story not because I believe that it actually happened. In my experience death never comes right on schedule. Sometimes it is too early and sometimes too late, but never on schedule. No, I did not repeat the story because I thought that it actually happened, but rather because it illustrates two different types of sin identified in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Things done and things left undone.

Things done: in Elizabethan English, those things "we have done which we ought not to have done." Clearly, the man who committed adultery had sinned by having an affair. For many of us this type of sin is very well known and is perhaps best summed up by the line, "I wish I knew how to quit you." It can refer to sex, food, drink, drugs, anger, jealousy—a whole laundry list of things which we do but ought not to do.

The other type of sin, those things left undone, or when "we have left undone those things which we ought have done" is more difficult to talk about. And yet this type of sin is perhaps more troublesome. In the story of the man who committed adultery, both the man and his wife knew that things had changed in their marriage, and both had failed to do anything about it until it was too late. Roman Catholic moral theologian James Keenan identifies this failure as the failure to bother to love. And he suggests that "things left undone" is not just one type of sin but that it is the very

definition of sin. He claims that failure to bother to love is a sin of strength because it involves one not doing something that one was capable of doing.

On the other hand when we do things we ought not to do Keenan describes those things as sins of weakness. We are very good and getting better all the time at naming the things that we have done but ought not to have done. The only problem is we are not getting much better at not doing them. Despite millennia of penitential practice, more than a century of psychotherapy, and decades of self-improvement books, confessional television shows, tweets and blogs, we seem to be no better off at not doing those things which we ought not to have done. And yet we love to focus on them, confess them, and make public proclamations of our guilt and promises to amend our lives. Perhaps this is why Jesus recommends against practicing our piety in public. It didn't work then and it is not working now.

Keenan points out that our modern preference and focus on sins of weakness (that is, things we do but ought not to do) is in contrast to the focus of Jesus in the gospel tradition. Jesus never calls out to the weak in their weakness but always the strong. I will quote at length Keenan's very succinct description of the gospel tradition. "When the [tax collector] and Pharisee are praying in the temple, the sin of the Pharisee is in his strength. He specifically considers all that he has. When the rich man steps over Lazarus and ignores him at the gate, the rich man's sin is not in his weakness but in his strength. He could have done something, but he did not. The steward who asked forgiveness for his debt is forgiven, but he's punished because he does not forgive the minor debt of his own employee. Out of his strength, the steward is convicted. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan—where is the sin? Even the robbers who committed the crime of beating the poor man and robbing him on the road to Jericho are ignored. The focus is on the Levite and the priest; they could have acted but they did not. They sinned precisely out of their strength. The same is true of the goats that were separated from the sheep, the man who did not invest the talent, the virgins who were not vigilant and the son who did not go into the party." In the end they all left undone those things which they ought to have done.

Things that we have done are much easier to identify and to excuse. After all, our weaknesses are well known and documented. But they do not account for the hardness of our hearts, our blindness to human suffering other than our own, or our deafness to cries for justice. The problem of course is that when our hearts are hard, when we are blind, and when we are deaf, we are clueless like so many of the sinners in the gospels. They never see judgment coming. Lent is a time for us to open our eyes and see. And Lent is a time for us to do something. Lent is time to consider our own sin in the light of our own mortality. I invite you this Lent to ponder the ways in which you have not done those things which you ought to have done. Ponder the ways in which you have failed to bother to love. Commit yourself to taking the time this Lent to practice the art of bothering to love. For as Bill Tully always used to say in his final blessing, "Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us. So be quick to love and make haste to be kind."

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