



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Backyard Swimming Pools: A Theology

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 9, 2013

The Third Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Luke 7:11-17

A very close friend of mine works as a chaplain at a major children's hospital in another east coast city. Around mid-afternoon on Memorial Day, I got a text from her that read, "Don't ever let your son have a backyard swimming pool." Nothing else, and nothing else needed to be said. I got the message. With great effort I resisted the temptation to call my son Brian immediately with this new piece of advice, knowing that no pool was on his drawing board and understanding he would once again kindly realize that I am a nut job when it comes to protecting him and his family.

I never seem to finish learning it: life and death flow mingled together. Not a one of us in this room or in any room escapes knowledge of that fact. And yet in the world I love to imagine, there at least would be lovely symmetry to the whole process: full lives, followed by good and timely deaths. A screw-up, which is what the death of a child always seems like, would never occur—in a backyard swimming pool, by a stray bullet, by a falling bomb or anything else. But as I well know, I am not in charge, and really awful things happen.

Two fantastical stories of really bad occurrences, though each with a very happy ending, come to us from the scripture this morning. Like so many other stories in the Bible, they set me to thinking about what we truly are to glean from these accounts, which sometimes thrill me, often confuse me, but never leave me exactly as they found me. I didn't write the Bible, not a single part of it. And to date there are no plans for a new addition that I or any one else will be asked to write. And, yet, if I am honest—I love the Bible, and treasure it in fact—but there are some things about it that I would change if I could. It is a little top heavy in miracle stories for me, not because I don't love a great story—for I do as much as anyone—but because they simply don't square with the experience of life as I know it.

These two today are cases in point. The first is from the Hebrew scripture, telling the story of Elijah, the great prophet, who first saves a widow and her son from starvation, a great drought having befallen the land. And then when the young son dies anyway, Elijah brings him back to life. From the New Testament, Jesus encounters another widow on the way to bury her son, an older guy but still too young to die in my sense of the world. The narrator notes that Jesus, taking compassion on the young man's mother, brings him back to life. No miracle was requested; he just took it upon himself to raise the dead!

Each story presents a common theme in Judaic-Christian literature: God's particular penchant for widows. In a world of disregard for women, a widow was the lowest of the low. The death of her husband took her *raison-d'être*, her purpose having been solely derived from her role as wife. In the eyes of the social order of the time, a widow became practically invisible. The treatment, truly unthinkable to us, resulted in a class of women, now without husbands, who had no means of support, their best hope being that a son might take pity upon them and maintain them in some sort of arrangement. Both Old and New Testaments admonish that those who love God will be particularly conscious of the plight of the marginalized, specifically widows. In a modern reading of the scripture, we appropriately understand the emphasis upon widows to be symbolic of our call to compassion for all those at the edge of our society, to see those whom we would rather not see.

Life in NYC almost demands the capacity to render some as invisible. On the subway Friday afternoon, drenched and unpleasant as most everyone else, I watched an obviously disturbed man standing in very close quarters with the rest of us as he carried on an animated conversation with someone, one not present as far as the rest of us could tell. It was mildly troubling to watch, but like others on the train, I simply and quickly stopped seeing him. I

privately noted the discomfort, the caution and the mild annoyance. As I resumed reading, my silent, “God help him,” seemed even to me as impotent as it was. To be clear, I am not suggesting that any of us could or should have done more; I am only noting the handiness of blindness—and particularly the speed with which we can forget even the momentary sighting of such need.

So if that is our only take away-point from these stories, so be it: we are better for the reminder. Compassion and the action that derives from it are unmistakably front and center in the teachings of our faith tradition. Jesus was especially clear: you know, “If you do it to the least of these, you do it to me” business. How we respond is complicated and always will be, affecting everything from how we vote to whether or not we ever make eye contact on the subway, from how we spend our money and how much we give to the church to how much we personally consume of the world around us. And if that seems too hard or too much to think about, shame on us. This is the life to which we have been called; we don’t have to do it perfectly, but we really need to do it consciously. I often have the inclination to pray: Lord, make me more uncomfortable with the plights of those around me and forgive my willful blindness; but I confess sometimes it seems too dangerous a prayer to meaningfully pray.

But what of the miracles themselves? Was Jesus a traveling faith healer? Probably in some way, he was. Was a brush with him the great fortune of the few who came into his presence, a handful of widows, a group of lepers, some who were lame, a few who were blind? Are these feats the substance of his life and presence here on earth, or is it more likely that these accounts are the literary technique of those whose deepest desire it was to tell of the power and impact of his presence? Who can say, and in answer to those who claim such conclusions to be matters of faith, who can argue? In the end each of us has to appropriate such stories as we can, for there is no failsafe way of knowing whether the stories emanate from what we call reality or from the power of and desire for symbolism.

Either way, where we get into trouble, I fear, is our desire for God to control the world as we would. If our faith depends upon such outcome, it will not hold. I sadly have known many over the years whose literal view of the scripture literally cost them their faith. One thing that is clearly beyond conjecture is the knowledge that life is subject to randomness, as wildly random as this spring’s outbreak of twisting deadly tornadoes that have killed some and left untouched neighbors just steps away. Is it the saving of the few or the wideness of the randomness that is most representative of and inherent in the Divine plan, should there be such a thing? I frankly doubt that there is, save in the broadest terms. All things held in God’s loving hands is not the same metaphor as a Divine Plan followed at God’s direction and control.

Could it be that our desire for precise meaning and purpose of every occurrence, including our own illnesses and deaths and joys, is faulty thinking? Could it be that the only meaningful plan for our lives is that wherever we are, there God is. And that God’s presence is what gives our lives purpose and sustenance, regardless of the changes and chances of life? That seems so much more fundamentally right to me, a solid ground of God’s being with and for us: not magically concocting circumstances but slowly and surely transforming us into the likeness of Christ. Then our prayer becomes less, “Get me out of this mess, deliver me from this illness or even impending death,” and more, “Fill me, O God, with your presence so that I can faithfully face any obstacle that comes my way.”

As far as I can tell, my brothers and sisters, in real life, there are no shortcuts. There is random goodness, there is random tragedy, there is random all in-between. Only God is the constant, and only God holds us through it all.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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