



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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"Who Washed Your Sheets?"

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 18, 2015

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Mark 10:35-45

One of the great joys of being a parish priest is visiting newborns in the hospital. In almost every case, the occasion is one of great celebration, and often I am privileged to offer a blessing in the hospital room.

I never tire of gazing at life in that pristine state, so unaffected by the cares and expectations of the world. The "little bundles" have not been subjected yet to what the Apostle Paul called the "powers and principalities" of society.

But I have to admit, even in that innocent setting, the challenges of growing up emerge. When our third daughter came along I remember the involved evaluation process to which Labor and Delivery wards subject newborns. Immediately following the happy news—"Dr. Dannals, you have a healthy red-headed daughter!"—they began to evaluate her . . . and ended by giving her a score.

Because I had this experience I wasn't totally surprised when upon recently visiting a mother and her newborn in the hospital, I ran into this again. Before going to the hospital, I had learned that mother and child were doing well, that great celebration was going on in the family, and that it was a good time to offer a blessing. Upon entering the room, however, I found the new mother holding her baby, and the mother was weeping. When I asked what was wrong, she blurted out: "My baby has a left toe that is crooked and, therefore, they gave her a score of nine on a scale of ten . . . I don't know what bothers me more," said the mother, "that they have that stupid test, or that my baby only made a nine."

It was the baby's first day of life and she was already having trouble scoring high enough to make the grade. As Lewis Smedes has said, "The whole world is a critic and I'm tired of reading the reviews."

In the midst of this cultural reality, the Christian faith interrupts this "measurement view" of valuation, and declares:

"LIFE IS A GIFT!"

And if we really believe that and receive God as our sustaining grace, then trying to earn our way into worthiness, or trying to save ourselves from various challenges that come our way, seems ridiculous.

Jesus said in our Gospel text appointed for this week:

"Are you able to drink the cup from which I drink? . . . Those who try to save their life will lose it . . . Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant . . . Whoever wishes to be first among you must be last."

To try to save our life destines us to constant measurements and questions: Have I done enough? Have I tried hard enough? How do I compare?

It's relentless! And our society exacerbates the problem!

Daily we hear reports of indexes and evaluative instruments:

- Economic indicators
- Government officials' approval rates
- Employment evaluations
- Marriage and family health (or lack thereof) measurements, etc.

But we have yet to put any societal energy into assessing that aspect of living that was the most important to Jesus: "The servanthood measurement." That is, how much am I giving myself to others?

Wouldn't it be startling one evening to turn on CNN or pick up the daily newspaper and hear or read about the wonderful percentages of Americans who have:

- Turned the other cheek
- Loved their enemies
- Fed the hungry
- Given a cup of cold water to the thirsty
- Welcomed the stranger
- Clothed the naked
- Cared for the sick
- Visited those in prison.

But that isn't likely to happen, because our system of measurement is based on values quite foreign to the Kingdom of God. All week, in a hundred different ways, we hear that we are essentially consumers and that we find our value in our buying power.

Listen: If achievement and possessiveness are your (our) goals, then fear and disappointment will be your (our) results, because you'll (we'll) never achieve enough; you'll (we'll) never possess enough. But, if receiving life as a gift is our aim, and living with an ensuing service to others is our life's goal, then joy and blessing will be the result.

Jesus asked: "Are you able to drink the cup from which I drink?"

In June, 1981, I entered the ordained ministry. On that occasion a beloved friend gave me my first chalice. I was 25 years old. I was full of love for God and the church. I desired to bring the good news of the Gospel to bear in the world. But I was green! I wasn't quite aware of the full picture; I wasn't prepared for the cost. In some vague way, I heard that question: "Are you able to drink from the cup from which I drink?" Along with James and John (in the Gospel text), I found myself nodding "yes." But in my imagination I could see Jesus raising his eyebrows and rolling his eyes.

"Can you drink the cup of self-giving?"

... "Can you empty it to the dregs?"

... "Can you taste the sorrows of others; can you celebrate the joys of serving?"

... "Can you live your life to the full whatever it may bring?"

... "Can you measure your life according to God's grace rather than all those other measurements?"

Many years ago, I served as a youth counselor at a junior high camp. One of the bright young adult counselors on the team was Maria Acosta. She was attractive and smart and had a beautiful Venezuelan heritage.

Maria was assigned the hardest girls cabin for the week. She had 18 hardened inner-city girls to befriend and build into a community. Among the girls was an outcast named Lisa. Maria knew going into the week that she had challenges. Early in the morning of the first day, Maria noticed that Lisa had wet her bed. Before any of the other girls knew of this, Maria snatched those sheets off of Lisa's bed and quietly took them to the laundry and washed and dried those sheets. While the campers were about their afternoon activities, Maria then carefully put those clean sheets back on Lisa's bed for the second night. Well, she wet the bed again and then again. Each morning Maria would repeat her careful pastoral and servant work on behalf of Lisa. She was determined to show lavish love and care for this girl, and help her, if possible, to find a level of acceptance and community. On the fourth day, Lisa didn't wet her bed, and she was beginning to turn the corner and find belonging.

Let me ask you: "Who washed your sheets?"

Who came alongside you when your toe was crooked, when a relationship fell apart, when you didn't make the grade, when you weren't included? Who supported you with love and care when life fell apart, when you were confronted with a failure, when you needed abiding support?

And, for whom are you washing sheets? Who among you has experienced a foible, a breakage in life, something fallen apart, and you've come alongside him/her/them with support, love and mercy?

Jesus asked James and John, and he seemingly asks us: "Are you able to drink from the cup from which I drink?"
May we be found responding, "Yes, with God's help."

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