



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Gifts of Authenticity and Purpose

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 18, 2016

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost—The Feast of St. Bartholomew Observed

Based on I Corinthians 4:9-15; John 1:47-51

If I had two gifts to give you, I think they would be the gifts of authenticity and purpose. These would be the kinds of gifts that when you come to the important chapters of your life's story, you could receive the inspired declaration which Jesus named before Nathanael (also Bartholomew) in today's gospel text:

"Here is one in whom there is no deceit, no guile ..."

But I can't give these gifts ... only God can give these, and they don't appear overnight. We receive the gifts of authenticity and purpose as we work all of our lives to co-author our story with God.

There's a powerful scene in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, when, many years after a brave and sacrificial army platoon went to great lengths to save Private Ryan, James Frances Ryan, played by Matt Damon, went to the military cemetery to visit the gravesite of the platoon leader, Captain John H. Miller. Standing before his tombstone, Private Ryan asked out loud: "Have I been a good person? I've tried to live my life well, one of which you'd be proud ..." And after his wife joined him at the site, he pleaded with her: "Tell me that I've been a good person." "You have," she whispered. He then saluted his fallen leader.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was about to die in a German concentration camp, he wondered on paper what kind of people society was going to need in the generation ahead. He wrote: "What the church and society will need, what our century will yearn for, is not people of genius, not brilliant tacticians, not people of means, but straight-forward, faithful, honest and purposeful men and women."

So, first, we're on a journey of authenticity, and I'd like to suggest a few stages that we've got to go through to live into our purpose — both individually and as a community of faith.

I think the first thing we have to do is to accept the raw material that God has given us. One of the hardest things for some of us to do is to accept the hand God has dealt us. Sometimes it's brutally hard!

Liesel Brooks was only eleven when she accidentally learned that her parents had been Nazis. Her father was already dead, and her mother raised her in the silence about the past. But now she knew! She recounts that upon learning the news she shouted at her mother, "You're a murderer! Don't ever touch me again, because you have made me an untouchable for the rest of my life."

Several years later, Liesel left for boarding school in England, never to return home again. After high school she wandered for twenty years, until she found a spot in a tenement apartment in Los Angeles. In her own words: "I was a rootless, stateless wanderer, holding on to layers upon layers of raw wounds and seething anger, lying about my past at every turn, seeking love and security in the worst places."

She found a second-chance family one night when a neighbor woman invited her to a local Holiness Church. It was there in the midst of the singing, the prayers, and the Lord's Supper that she began to weep and to ask for help. Through the next few months she began to accept her life, what it was, and what it could be ... In short, she began to accept the raw material God had bestowed upon her. She came to terms with her

beginnings with the Nazi parents, and she began to learn that she could go on and make a story of authenticity and purpose.

Stage two is to own the bad chapters you've already written. All of us have written some paragraphs and sentences and some old chapters that we wish to God we had not written and would give anything to delete from our story. But we can't! What we can do, however, is arise from the sublime arrogance of denial and own them, but own them as chapters that are finished. Over. In the past. In forgiveness, own them, rather than being owned by them.

The third stage on the journey to authenticity and purpose is the creation of an unabridged vision for the rest of life. King David abridged his vision about the reality of Uriah and Bathsheba, and it took the prophet Nathan to poke his finger into David's eyes to pry them open, to let the reality come in.

We all do it. O God, we all do it. There are pieces of reality we just don't want to see. We abridge our vision because we don't listen to what St. Thomas called "the silent voice of reality." We don't want to listen to the cries of the oppressed. We don't want to see all of the issues related to immigration. We don't want to understand the issues of those different from ourselves. It's hard work. We don't even want to listen to the murmurings inside of ourselves telling us that we're not well. And then we come into this holy space and experience holy silence. We stop long enough to take stock, to hear ancient words of acceptance and forgiveness, and to consider again how our vision can be unabridged. This place reminds us that we're not alone. It holds up for us a vision of radical inclusion—that we're welcome.

And the fourth stage we come to on our journey to authenticity and purpose is being touched with our calling, nudged and wooed by a God who will not leave us alone until we live into our purpose.

After the woman at the well left Jesus to return to her community of Sychar, the disciples were left alone with Jesus. They were concerned that he eat something, but Jesus wanted to talk about his real food, which is the work of the kingdom. Thus he stated, "I send you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." This is another way of saying that we have inherited a mission that began before we showed up on the scene, and now we are blessed by an invitation to join the mission ... with our gifts, energy, vision, resources, time, love, passion, advocacy, participation, commitment, and engagement.

As the apostle Paul states in his letter to the Corinthians:

"We are fools for the sake of Christ ... when reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as beloved children of God."

So there is Bartholomew and the other apostles, there is the church's traditions, the church's sacraments, there is this hole space and this church's holy history, and there are four gospels in the New Testament. But the Christian experience tells us that there are actually five gospels: the fifth is yours, and mine, and ours. Now, with God's help, let's go live it and write it.

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