

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

1757 Conway Street • St. Paul, Minnesota 55106 • phone 651.774.1585 • e-mail church@stpascals.org

February 12, 2017

I'd like to share with you a memento from my distant past, exactly 45 years ago, to be exact. I was 13 years old and on vacation in Washington D.C. with my family, which at that time consisted of my parents and three younger siblings. One night my Mom and Dad wanted to go out for dinner with some old friends who lived there, and I was made to be the babysitter for my sisters and brother in the hotel room. I was given a list of instructions before my Mom and Dad left for the evening, and the most important one was that nobody was to leave the room while they were away. In that regard, I was successful in my role that night—I kept us all inside.

But things did not go well. My siblings used the occasion to test my authority and my temper by pushing the boundaries of what they were allowed to do. And they succeeded in infuriating me, just as I'm sure they hoped. After finally getting them all to go to bed, I wrote a scathing letter for my parents to discover when they got back to the hotel and we were all asleep. Basically, it was tattling on my siblings for being so difficult.

Well, life went on and we all grew up, and eventually I'd forgotten all about that miserable night in D.C. —until the evening of my ordination dinner party 17 years later. My father rose to offer a toast in my honor before about 250 guests. He reminded everyone that he was a lawyer, and then turning to me he said, "Lawyers save things." And so he pulled out that angry letter from the babysitter in the hotel room in D.C. and did a dramatic public reading of it at the microphone. He explained that while he had heard quite a bit of talk lately about what a fine young man I was, he wanted us all to know that there were a few holes in the veneer image. Three years ago, on the occasion of my 25th anniversary of priesthood, I was presented with the framed original of that letter. Here's what it says:

Dad and Mom~

All the kids gave me a hard time tonight. Martha and her big mouth and cute comments. Jimmy and Molly refusing to obey me as usual, and Molly ordering Jim and Martha to do just the opposite of what I said. Then came the lecture from Jim and Molly on what a baby I would be if I told. I can't control them without slugging them (which I didn't do). I tried separating them but they of course refused. Either they get some FAST discipline or I quit as a babysitter. But I can't and won't go through this again.

Mike

So there!

Why am I sharing all this today? Because I think it's an excellent illustration of how one can do a job, or keep faithful to a responsibility, with perfect compliance and still fail. My job as a babysitter that night in Washington was to keep everybody in the room and to make sure they got to bed on time. And I did that, with a great deal of smug self-righteousness to boot...bordering on martyrdom, I'd say. But in the process I played my part in making everybody angry and unhappy. Nobody had included happiness or peace on the list of my responsibilities that night, but I think it was meant to be assumed and hoped for. There's more to being an older brother than simply making sure that the letter of the law is upheld in babysitting. Nobody left the room, but what was going on inside the room was miserable. I failed, even while doing everything expected of me by the instructions.

And it's just that very same kind of failure to which Jesus is pointing in today's Gospel of Matthew...the failure that only looks at the instructions, the rules, the laws, as a way of deciding whether people have measured up well enough. It's the failure that sees regulations as ends in themselves and never bothers to ask what kinds of communities and what kinds of human beings are meant to be fashioned by following the rules. There's a word for that kind of disposition: "Legalism." It's a way of thinking and acting that imagines that if people just stick to the laws—if they just manage not to leave the room—then it doesn't much matter how they live together inside. And it's toxic, and dreary, and deadening.

And nobody is bigger on laws and rules than religion...so much so that it's all that some people can think of when they think of Jewish or Catholic practice—all those rules. It reduces the joy and wonder and beauty of discovering God to some shallow conformity to a set of prescribed behaviors. It's to those kinds of Pharisees that Jesus was speaking in the gospel.

He was inviting his audience to cultivate love and happiness in this life by practicing habits that free us for good living, and even for joy in the midst of a dark time. Being faithful to laws and rules are intended to help us do that, rather than to our having to figure it all out for ourselves, by ourselves, as if starting from scratch with each generation. Laws and rules are intended to be gifts, so that we might know with confidence that some patterns of behavior can lead us to happiness, while others only *seem* to.

Laws are useful and good and necessary—but they are not the point. Which is why Jesus doesn't throw out the old law, but invites people to understand why it exists at all.

- Instead of merely not killing people, he says, how about befriending them?
- Instead of merely not insulting people, how about cultivating community with them?
- Instead of merely suing people to get justice, how about reconciling with them?
- Instead of merely not getting divorced from your spouse, how about attempting to nurture holy love there?
- Instead of merely not committing adultery, how about working to regard people as holy souls rather than objects?
- And instead of making solemn oaths to do the right thing, how about becoming a person whose life is so compelling and honest that oaths aren't necessary to convince others that you'll do the right thing?

Instead of merely keeping people in the room, and abiding by the script laid down by authority, how about learning to love one another while inside? Wouldn't that be a blessing. Our Eucharist trains us to make it so