

Father Martin Fitzgerald Homily – 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C - March 2nd/3rd, 2019

It was 130 degrees when the C-130 dropped me off on the runway at Baghdad International Airport. Not knowing what the chapel had on inventory, I had brought all sorts of extra gear to celebrate the sacraments and to have Catholic religious education materials.

They call it the bag drag. And that's exactly what it was. There were no carts to help you roll your gear across the runway. There was no one to help you. So; I dragged several bags, two 100-pound camouflage bags at a time, across the molten hot pavement under the blazing sun. You just do what you need to do.

A day later when I arrived at my assignment, I spread my gear in a small hardened tent – like a hut. I was a bit shocked to see that the US military had wired small televisions into all the tents with 24/7 programming to help lift troop morale. I'm not a big TV fan; but I can see how for many soldiers, sailors, and airmen, TV shows can be a nice distraction from the stresses and hell of war.

I looked outside and saw on the ancient city's rooftops all sorts of makeshift antennas and dishes, as the Iraqis, a suffering people, were now desperately trying to intercept our TV signals and to enjoy some American shows. I thought; this was the first chance for most of them to gain some understanding of who we were as Americans. They were unsure; just who were these people who had stormed into their country during Operation Desert Storm?

Just a few days after my arrival, I turned on the TV while putting on my uniform. The channel happened to be on a comedy show with standup comedian Steve Marmel holding a microphone and telling off-color jokes to an American audience. I stopped, looked, and listened. I clearly remember seeing this man standing in front of an American flag speaking to hundreds of people who held alcoholic drinks in their hands as they laughed at sexual jokes, jokes that were mocking and belittling our presidents and leaders.

I thought: what did an Iraqi citizen now think, having waited so long to experience American life, to see how drunk Americans would laugh at sick jokes, mock their national leaders, while doing so in the presence of their nation's flag? I thought; how could we hope to share the joys of freedom with others when we dumped these images onto them? Surely; some Iraqi was going to see this morning's show and then take it upon themselves to strap up with an explosive vest and go out to kill as many Americans as possible.

I shared my concern with leadership but at that point I believe we were failing to include military chaplains in the equation in order to find lasting peace. The response I received was that this was "American freedom" at work. People could freely broadcast, people could freely choose to watch, and so on.

But to me; this was freedom at its worst. For all the good things we were doing to help these people; allowing such television shows to be aired was exercising poor judgment. It was like taking a child to an adult rated movie. It was way over the top. It shoved the idea of freedom down the throats of a people who were innocently searching for the meaning of what it was to be an American. In this instance, I believe we were shooting ourselves in the foot. By allowing such a program to air, we were fueling fires of hatred for those who did not understand us.

Our scriptures today would have us set an example for others. “Can a blind person guide a blind person?” Why do we notice the splinter in Iraq’s eye, in North Korea’s eye, in Syria’s eye, or in Iran’s eye, but we fail to perceive the wooden beam in our own? If we as Americans suffer from moral blindness, then how can we hope to help other peoples, other nations, even our own children to embrace true freedom in Christ?

We must set the example. We do a disservice to bring our children to the baptismal font when we have no intention of going to church or teaching our children prayers and the love of God.

We should not expect our children to make a first confession when we ourselves as parents or guardians haven’t made a confession in decades.

1 John 3 / Beloved; we are God’s children now, what we shall later be has not yet fully come to light.

The world is filled with God’s children. It would help if we were more sensitive to the child within each person. I believe this is what I saw in Iraq – many like children, simple, childlike, perhaps old in years yet wanting to learn lessons we sometimes were unable to teach.

From an unknown author: Children learn what they live

If a child lives with criticism, he or she learns to condemn.

If a child lives with hostility, he or she learns to fight.

If a child lives with ridicule, he or she learns to be shy.

If a child lives with shame, he or she learns to feel guilty.

If a child lives with tolerance, he or she learns to be patient.

If a child lives with encouragement, he or she learns confidence.

If a child lives with praise, he or she learns to appreciate.

If a child lives with fairness, he or she learns justice.

If a child lives with security, he or she learns to have faith.

If a child lives with approval, he or she learns to like him or herself.

If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he or she learns to find love in the world.

If we are to successfully parent others in the faith, then we must be of sound character.

In our first reading Sirach proposes how to measure one’s character - which comes down to how the person talks. Wisdom would have us listen carefully, especially to gain an appreciation for someone’s interior life in how they speak to us and how we too, would speak to others. Wisdom helps us to cultivate healthy friendships, to walk side by side with others who use their God-given freedom to build up, and not to tear down. Peace is built upon justice which is built upon integrity which is built upon character. If we are wise, then we will develop strong character. At the US military academies twenty years ago, there was a perception of a growing moral crisis in America – and so the academies established a “Character Development Office.” Wisdom would have us be good measures of character –

of our own character and of those we wish to walk with on our journey towards God's kingdom. We should pray for wisdom; that we as parents, teachers, and spiritual leaders may have the ability help all of God's children by setting examples of Christian character. A child then says; "I want to be more like you." Just like I believe the Iraqis in their childlike state could have more easily said, "We want to be more like you Americans" if we had only been ready to set a better example in what some of them had seen on the television that morning.

Living in dark times, Saint Paul yet reassures us in our second reading, "be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

Paul hearkens back to Psalm 127 which tells us: If the Lord does not build the house, then in vain do the builders labor.

Truly; we build our spiritual homes, our entire lives, even our nation in vain, if we do not place the Lord at the center. If we are still breathing, it is not too late to redirect our lives. Paul challenges us to be "fully devoted". If we are in it to win it, then we must be firm and steadfast. We must be men and women of strong spiritual character, running not just a worldly rat race but the race of faith. Children want to be part of a winning team. This does not mean having all sorts of material things. This does not mean immediate gratification. Winning means praying in the home, making time to listen to one another and to listen to God's voice, and appreciate the gift of life we share. Saint Paul says a crown awaits us, and victory comes to those who place their faith in Jesus Christ.

America, like a tall oak tree that has stood for over 243 years, no longer bears as much good fruit as it once did.

Luke's Gospel asks: what about you? Are you bearing good fruit? There's a lot of rotten fruit at today's market. Are we as a faith community bearing good fruit? Are we at Ascension school bearing good fruit? (I believe we are.)

When people experience us; do they taste and see the goodness of the Lord?