

Blest Be the Ties That Bind

November 19, 2017

Growing up, dinner was a sacred time in our household. You never got a free pass. At exactly 5:30 every single night, my mom would call up the stairs for us to come down. The TV would be turned off and so would the radio. Dad would set down the newspaper, and when we were all seated he would say, “Shall we pray?” He would ask it as a question, but it wasn’t a question. There was no saying no. He asked “shall we pray” as an invitation, and then 365 days a year we would all pray together, “Bless us, Oh Lord, and these thy gifts which, we are about to receive, from thy bounty, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

Those of you who grew up in a Catholic household probably know that prayer. (My dad’s probably rolling over in his grave as I tell you all that it was actually written by Martin Luther.) But we would pray that 365 days a year. It wasn’t different on Thanksgiving. It wasn’t different on Christmas. “Bless us, Oh Lord, and these thy gifts.”

We would all say, “Amen,” and that’s where things would then change. Every day, Dad would pick someone who was sitting at the table and insert their name into this prayer. “Saint Sarah of Green Bay, pray for us.” Whoever was sitting at the table, if it was one of our neighbors there for dinner, “Saint Jenny from up the block, pray for us.” If we had cousins in town, “Saint Martha from Connecticut, pray for us.” It didn’t matter if people were religious or not. It was kind of a way that Dad brought some levity to the table, but it was also a reminder that the sacred weaves its way through each and every life that is gathered.

When my folks moved with my brother about 10 years ago, my brother’s title changed. He was no longer Saint Thomas of Fredonia. He became Saint Thomas of Oostburg.

This idea that each and every one of our lives is sacred is part of what we celebrate in Memorial Sunday. When my dad talked about Saint Thomas or Saint Edward, he’s talking about not the Catholic idea of saints – someone who has performed a number of miracles and that has been beatified and canonized – but rather the New Testament idea of saints – that each one of our lives, the lives of all of the faithful, show the rest of us a little bit more about what it means to live as a child of God, that each one of our lives is a witness to the rest of us about how it looks to live a life committed to Christ and to God’s ways.

When I am with families in hospitals and in hospice and when we’re preparing funerals and memorial services, I often talk about a reality that I am quite sure of. We don’t know much about the afterlife, but I am convinced of this: that on the other side of the grave we do not have any unfinished business. Hollywood gets that wrong. When we die, we are made whole. The scriptures tell us that on the other side there is no more sadness, there is no more crying, there are no more tears. We are made whole in Christ Jesus, and that means that even if you didn’t go to see Grandma as often as you should have, she is not on the other side holding a grudge wagging her finger at you. Whatever we may feel is unfinished business here, our regrets, our sadness, the people who have gone before us are healed of that brokenness. They’re healed of any resentments they may have had. Gone are any grudges that we may have held between us. If there is any yearning at all, it is that they are now yearning for our wholeness and our healing.

So when my dad would say, “Saint Thomas of Oostburg, pray for us,” what he was reminding us of is that the saints in heaven are indeed praying for us, yearning for our wholeness and our healing. The only thing that they want now is our wholeness and our health.

I was thinking about Dad’s prayer, and that idea of our wholeness, and those who have gone before us yearning for our wholeness as I prayed our Gospel reading for today, that beautiful passage of the Beatitudes which starts the Sermon on the Mount. The church recommends every year that when we celebrate Memorial Sunday we read that reading. This year what struck me is that I think that it’s actually a call to an ethic, to tie ourselves to those who are listed in the text – to ally ourselves to them – to ally ourselves with the poor, with those who mourn, with the broken hearted, with the meek, with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Our world tells us to align ourselves with the powerful, to ally ourselves with those who will help us get ahead. But the Gospel tells us to ally ourselves with those who mourn. The Gospel tells us to ally ourselves with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

You know that I love word roots and how it is that words come into being. The word ally comes from the Latin, **ligare**, to tie. Think of ligaments or a ligature. What we are doing when we ally ourselves to the poor, to the broken hearted, to those who grieve, to the peacemakers, is we are tying ourselves them, and in turn to God and God’s way. We are reminding ourselves that it is in connecting ourselves, tying ourselves to those who are closest to God’s heart, that we will then be a part of God’s healing and God’s justice, indeed the coming of the reign of God.

And this is not only something that is an interpersonal ethic, this is also a social ethic. Think of all of the major woes of our current time. Think of Harvey Weinstein and Roy Moore. People have tied themselves to certain things, and the proof is in the pudding.

And so today, as we celebrate our Memorial Sunday, as we tie ourselves and remind ourselves that the ties of love never die, the ties of love are never unbound, let us also remember the importance of allying ourselves with God’s grace, God’s compassion, God’s mercy, God’s healing, God’s hope. It is in doing that, in tying ourselves to one another, that we will indeed be part of that wonderful verse in the Lord’s Prayer: “thy kingdom come, and thy will be done.”

Today, during our offertory, you are invited at any time that you feel so moved, to come forward and tie one of these ribbons to our tree, our Memorial Tree, as a sign of those who you have lost that you would like to continue to be tied to. Let us go forth, trusting that God stays tied to all of us, especially those who we feel have lost. Alleluia and Amen.

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