

Stewardship Sermon
Sunday, November 3, 2013
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This is my stewardship sermon.

When she came into my office, I could tell that she had been crying. I ushered her to the soft chair and move the tissue box onto the table. "Tell me what happened," I began. In a rush of words, she told me about the events of the last few days. Her daughter, a girl the same age as my daughter, (in fact, she and my daughter car pooled to high school occasionally) did not return home after going out Friday night. She and her husband started searching for her on Saturday morning; they called all of her friends and checked all of her usual hang outs. When their daughter had not shown up by Saturday afternoon, they called the police and reported her as a missing person.

Early Sunday morning, she and her husband received a call from the New Orleans Police department. Her daughter was at Charity Hospital; she was found passed out on a staircase in the French Quarter from an overdose of cocaine. As the woman finished her story she began to cry into the tissue balled up in her hand. "Father Roy," she sobbed, "I don't know how any of this happened. She's a good student; she doesn't get into trouble. I never realized that there was such evil in the world!"

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I was still a deacon at the time in uptown New Orleans. She was a prostitute who worked the corner bar three blocks from the church. She was a white woman in a predominately African-American neighborhood and old beyond her years. Trinity Church had several strong outreach programs and she participated in most of

them, which is how I got to meet her. She stopped by my office and asked if I would come with her to her friend's house to pray with her.

The walk from the church to her friend's house was not more than four or five blocks, but those blocks connected two different worlds. Trinity Episcopal Church was among the oldest and richest churches both in the city of New Orleans and in the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana. Four or five blocks away was the St. Thomas Housing projects, one of the worst in the city. Four or five blocks away were ghetto apartments and crack houses.

The apartment we entered was dark. The only light came from a flickering television with a rabbit ears antenna on the top. At the back of the one room apartment all four of the stove burners were flaming. It was explained to me later that the apartment heat was electric and she paid for electricity but the gas for the stove was included in the rent so she headed her apartment with her stove. In the dim light I could see an elderly African-American woman bundled under multiple sweaters and blankets sitting on an old beat-up sofa. It was obvious from her surroundings that she was poor. It was obvious from her appearance that she was sickly. In what is still one of the proudest moments of my life, the prostitute walked over to her poor, sick friend gave her a hug, pointed at me and sad, "I want you to meet my Priest; I brought him here to pray for you."

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All the gifts on the angel tree went to the children and youth at the K-Bar-B Ranch. The K-Bar-B Ranch was a home for the children of delinquent parents. The children and youth at K-Bar-B were there because their parents could not or would not

take care of them. The church youth group wrapped the angel tree presents and we caravanned to K-Bar-B a few days before Christmas. Despite the fact that it was a party he did not want to be there and I could see him arguing with the Resident Advisor. He stood against the wall by himself. Although he was decades younger than me when I stood next to him he was the same height as me, maybe a little taller. The rest of the children, boys and girls, could not keep their eyes off the sacks and sacks of gifts that we had brought. They all sang Christmas songs and stared at the presents, all except for the young man next to me. "You a priest?" he asked. "I wouldn't be wearing this totally uncomfortable collar if I weren't," I replied. He nodded and then, suddenly, he blurted out, "I don't celebrate Christmas." "You don't celebrate Christmas?" I reflected back. "I didn't get no presents for four years. So I don't celebrate Christmas no more!"

I imagine the first Christmas without presents was spent in disbelief and fading hope. No presents on Christmas but maybe tomorrow. No presents on the day after Christmas, but surely they've just been delayed. No presents the week after Christmas. "It must've been something I've done to deserve this." The second year of no presents, I imagine, was spent in tears; the third year in anger. The fourth year of Christmas without any presents saw resolve to reject Christ and Christmas. "I don't celebrate Christmas no more!"

When the first package was presented to the young man, he hardly acknowledged its existence. In the rest of the room, wrapping paper and ribbons were flying through the air as children tore into their gifts to see what they had gotten. When we left, most of the young people were looking at and showing off their new possessions. The

young man who "doesn't celebrate Christmas no more" was still not a part of the general festivities. But, he had opened all of his Christmas gifts.

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In a world of woe, the church brings blessings. We provide the shield against evil. We care for those the world has forgotten. We are the anchor of hope for the hopeless. You have the incredible opportunity to support this ministry that has nothing less than the ambition to prepare the world for the Kingdom of God, beginning with the people of Martinsville and Henry County. I know the more astute among you can point out that all of my stories took place in Louisiana. True, I will not talk about you or what happens here in any of my sermons until there is some time and distance between us. But, do any of you think for a single moment that similar situations are not occurring right now, right here, and among people that you know? Do you believe our community is devoid of evil? Do you believe that our community is devoid of hopelessness? Do you believe that our community is devoid of people that the world would just as soon forget? The real question is: Are you going to be a part of our work of blessing? There is one thing about making a pledge to the church, you always know in your heart whether it's a big deal or not. I know what Christ Episcopal Church is doing is a big deal in many people's lives.

So...
Blessed are you
Or
Woe to you.

That is my stewardship sermon. Amen.