

MISTER DRISCOLL

“The Gospel of the Lord.”

“Praise be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,” comes the congregation’s response.

Closing the Lectionary, Father John descends from the pulpit and walks down the center aisle. Having finished the Gospel reading, it’s time for his homily, his sermon.

Adjusting his microphone, he looks around at the congregation. Smiling at the Farley boys in their shirts and ties, he tousles little Danny Jr.’s hair. Dan Farley, his wife Shannon, and their four kids, two boys and two girls, always sit in the second pew off the center aisle. They are a fixture at the 9:00 a.m. Mass. Heck, this service wouldn’t be the same without them.

Clearing his throat, Father John puts his hands together ...

“... I’d like to tell you a story ...”

Hi, I’m Tony Baggz. We’re here in the sanctuary at St. Kate’s. Father John is presiding at all three Masses this weekend, as Father Bob has taken a vacation to visit family.

Here in the neighborhood, Father John and Reverend Williams of Mt. Nebo Baptist are noted for their speaking prowess. So much so that they often get together at Sam’s Bistro on a weekday morning, share a pot of coffee, maybe some cinnamon rolls, and collaborate. So, I wouldn’t’ be surprised if the theme this weekend might be in the same vein at Reverend William’s service. In fact, I overheard them talking about horse racing this past Thursday and I imagine the sermon might be similar at Reverend John Randall’s Sunday service. You see, John enjoys watching the ponies and since yesterday was the running of the Kentucky Derby, it’s even money the Lutheran minister called up John or Martin for an idea or two.

Anyway, our celebrant is starting his talk.

What do you say we listen in...?

“Sister Mary Margaret was sitting in her office one morning at Mater Dei High School,” he begins.

A gentle rustle is heard as people shift in their seats. Father John is known for his humorous stories and I think the congregation anticipates one this morning.

“Waiting for her eleven o’clock freshman English class, Sister checks the morning’s mail. Picking up a pink envelope, she finds a birthday card from her sister, Madeline. Opening it, a twenty-dollar bill flutters to her desk. Reading the card, she chuckles and reaches for the bill. Making a note to call her sister, she starts to think about what she might do with the money.

“Looking out her window, a raggedly dressed gentleman catches her attention. His jacket’s torn as are the knees of his jeans. His shoes, badly worn, need major repair. His hair is unkempt, and his beard hasn’t seen a razor in at least a week. Seeing him, Sister makes her decision. Taking a note card, she encloses the bill and writes, ‘Have faith, sir.’ Corralling one of the ninth graders, a boy named Tim, she instructs him to take the card to the gentleman, now seated on a bench.

“Returning to the window, Sister sees Tim approach the gentleman. Extending the card, he points to Sister’s office window and explains what the card is and where it came from. The gentleman opens the card, takes out the bill and reading the note, smiles and nods his head. At that moment, a city bus arrives, the man boards, and young Tim returns to the building, as Sister picks up her books and heads for her class.

... End of story?”

Pausing, a crafty smile ambles across Father John’s face. “Well, not exactly,” he says.

“The following morning, Sister is again waiting for her English class when Mother Superior appears at her door.

“Sister, a gentleman outside my office is asking for you, she says.

“Surprised, she follows Mother Superior, wondering who this might be. Turning the corner, she blinks and after a few seconds recognizes the man as the fellow to whom she gave the note and the money, looking just as unkempt as he did yesterday.

“Sister, this is Mr. John Driscoll ... I have that correct, Mr. Driscoll?” Mother Superior asks.

“Yes ma’am,” he mumbles.

“Mr. Driscoll, may I present Sister Mary Margaret.”

“Nice to meet you ma’am,” the man says, quietly, nodding his head slowly and respectfully.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Driscoll,” the nun replies, a warm smile on her face.

A momentary awkward silence ensues. Then, reaching into his jacket pocket, he produces an envelope and extends it to the nun. “Here S’ter, this is for you.”

Taking it, she opens the envelope to find thirty twenty-dollar bills - six hundred dollars. Stunned she looks up at the raggedly dressed gentleman.

“I ... I don’t understand,” she stammers. “I ... I can’t take this, sir ... this is ...” she says softly, her words trailing off.

A smile lights up his eyes as Mr. Driscoll interrupts the nun’s protest.

“No, please S’ter, please take it ... it’s yours ...

... Have Faith paid thirty to one.”

The smile on Father John’s face stretches from ear to ear as enthusiastic and prolonged laughter erupts. Pausing, he allows the congregation to enjoy the moment before continuing.

“We heard in today’s gospel the incident of the worthless steward. A man who, given a responsibility, did nothing and earned the wrath of his master. In the end, he was thrown out into the darkness for his lack of effort.”

Again, a rustle is heard as people again shift in the pews. The priest’s words lack their previous impishness.

“In a few weeks we will hear of the five foolish virgins who were refused entry to a wedding celebration and left into the darkness because of their laziness and lack of foresight. And later, the story of a rich man who, though generous to his friends, paid no heed to a poor beggar at his doorstep and in the end, found himself in agony.”

Silence hangs heavy as Father John pauses to sip a glass of water, then pace the center aisle, his posture suggesting he’s searching for the right words. The congregation is still. Everyone now knows there is no laugh-out-loud punchline coming.

“There is a theme to these incidents,” the priest continues. “A message we rarely hear because, in a way, it contradicts our traditional teaching that the poor are worthy of our care and concern. Now it is true, those devastated by illness, tragedy, or catastrophe are our responsibility. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to live a life of charity and good will is no gamble. Not in the eyes of the Lord. After all, our church here, St. Katherine’s, is involved in more than a dozen programs to aid those in need. As are numerous other churches and synagogues in our little corner of the world. We as a family, willingly and lovingly accept our responsibility.”

All eyes are fixed on the priest. Other than a small child coughing softly, it is silent.

“But what the Lord is telling us in these incidents is that to be lazy, willingly or intentionally foolish or apathetic, is not a virtue. To live selfishly or indolently earns, not reward or eternal happiness, but rather the opposite. Jesus wouldn’t have told these parables unless He wished to make us understand the utter hopelessness of these vices, and their ultimate consequences. Living a life of value, using the talents we have and contributing to the common good, is the responsibility of all. And to squander that opportunity; to stand before God’s final judgment with nothing to show but sloth and avarice is to risk being thrown into a darkness where, as the Lord said, there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

“For those who gamble their eternal salvation on a life of laziness and greed, at that moment of divine judgment there will be a feeling of desolation, hopelessness, and the terror of knowing what is to come ...

... and there will be no Mr. Driscoll to save the day.”

The measure of a society is its ability to care for its weakest and most vulnerable citizens. To give aid and comfort freely, willingly to those devastated by some physical, natural, or social catastrophe is moral, just, and honorable. Something to be applauded. And that charity and kindness will be rewarded by the Ultimate Judge. It is a Judeo-Christian imperative.

But what about the other side of the coin? What about creating and maintaining an environment which allows a man to only live off the efforts of others? To contribute nothing but laziness, apathy, and greed? Vices the Ultimate Judge teaches leads to the ultimate bad end.

Is enabling another to live an indolent life or creating and maintaining an entire state of those who refuse to take responsibility for utilizing their God-given productive talents and gifts wise? Is endangering the eternal salvation of others a virtue ...

... or a vice?

Thinkaboutit, I'm Tony Baggz.