

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 5, 2009
Fr. Tom Elliott

“The Pastor’s Bathroom”

Ezekiel 2:2-5
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:7-10
Mark 6:1-6

One familiar sign of greatness is the ability to do something with nothing. As humans, we seem particularly drawn to such signs of greatness, and television reveals it. For example, there are cooking shows on the Food Network where chefs are given a pile of unlikely ingredients and challenged to create something amazing. Or some of you might remember the show “Junkyard Wars” where groups of people were challenged to build something useful out of a limited amount of junk. It is exciting and inspiring to see such things happen. What is even more exciting and inspiring is witnessing God making something out of nothing.

God demonstrates His amazing power and love, not by doing what we want Him to do, but rather, by transforming the most unlikely of situations into avenues of grace and salvation. This is precisely what Saint Paul is talking about in our second reading today. He explains to us that he was given a “thorn in the flesh... an angel of Satan” to beat him.¹ Repeatedly, Paul begged God to take that burden and suffering from him, but God told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). In other words, God wanted to demonstrate His amazing power and love by transforming Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” into an avenue of grace and salvation. This revelation was so transforming in Paul’s life that he wrote, “I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9b-10).

The importance of our understanding that God does not cause the difficulties in our lives, but He does use them as avenues of grace and salvation, cannot be underestimated. I came to see this in a new way recently through the book Left to Tell by Immaculée Ilibagiza. I briefly mentioned her book and her story last week at Mass, but I want to share with you the image from her experience that really helps us understand how God makes “something” out of “nothing” and transforms the situations in our lives into avenues of grace and salvation.

As you might remember, Immaculée and five other women spent 91 days hiding at a pastor’s house in a “small bathroom about four feet long and three feet wide.”² She describes the bathroom, writing, “There was a shower stall at one end and a toilet at the other—the room wasn’t big enough for a sink.”³ Later, an additional two ladies crowded into the small space. In addition to the crowded space, they were given limited amounts of food and water and had to be completely silent since Hutu killers were constantly coming around the pastor’s house looking for Tutsis to murder.

¹ 2 Corinthians 12:7

² Left to Tell, pg. 73

³ Ibid. pg. 73.

As I read Immaculée’s book, I realized that the pastor’s bathroom was an amazing image of the slavery, confinement, and unfreedom that every Christian has to face in life. While Immaculée’s situation was extraordinary, every Christian has a “bathroom” in his or her life—a place of suffering and difficulty, a place where the voice of the “enemy of our human nature” taunts us and threatens us.⁴ And, it’s *that* place that God desires to use as an avenue of grace and salvation for us! God did this for Immaculée and He will do it for us. A quick look at how God did this for Immaculée will give us a sense of how He desires to do it for us. Immaculée describes her experience in the pastor’s bathroom, writing—

I resolved to pray during every waking moment, beginning as soon as my eyes opened at 4 or 5 A.M. My first prayer was always to thank God that the pastor’s home had been built so it could shelter us during the genocide. Then I thanked Him for having the architect design the house with an extra bathroom, and for prompting the pastor to buy a wardrobe of exactly the right dimension to conceal our hiding place.

After my warm-up devotions of thanks, I began praying my rosary. I prayed many different Catholic prayers on the red and white beads. Sometimes I prayed so intensely that I broke out in a sweat. Hours would pass.... When I finished the rosary and my prayers, I’d take a “break” to meditate on some of my favorite Bible passages.

Even a few minutes not spent in prayer or contemplation of God became an invitation for Satan to stab me with his double-edged knife of doubt and self-pity. Prayer became my armor, and I wrapped it tightly around my heart.

-Left to Tell, pgs. 84-85

As Immaculée found a routine of prayer in the midst of the confinement and unfreedom of the bathroom, she began moving beyond the bathroom, not physically, but spiritually. She writes of the experience, saying, “I found a place in the bathroom to call my own: a small corner of my heart. I retreated there as soon as I awoke, and stayed there until I slept. It was my sacred garden, where I spoke with God, meditated on His words, and nurtured my spiritual self” (Left to Tell, pg. 95).

God demonstrated His all-powerful, amazing love by transforming the horrible, painful, confined space of the bathroom into an avenue of grace and salvation. Immaculée was able to recognize this transformation. She describes it, writing, “In the midst of the genocide, I’d found my salvation. I knew that my bond with God would transcend the bathroom, the war, and the holocaust... it was a bond I now knew would transcend life itself” (Left to Tell, pg. 107). This transformation was so extraordinary that Immaculée was later able to write, “Being in that bathroom had become a blessing for which I’d be forever thankful” (Left to Tell, pg. 107).⁵

Each of us has a “bathroom” in our lives—a situation that is painful and difficult; a situation that is confining, limiting, or saturated in unfreedom and slavery. It might be health issues, marital problems, an addiction, depression, anxiety, a broken relationship, fear, doubt,

⁴ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in his Spiritual Exercises, refers to Satan and evil as the “enemy of our human nature.”

⁵ Later, after the genocide, when Immaculée was living in the city, she actually missed her time with God in the bathroom. She writes, “Believe it or not, I actually longed for the days in the pastor’s bathroom, when I could talk to God for hours without interruption. I remember the joy and peace He filled my heart with during those long stretches of silent prayer, along with the mental clarity I enjoyed afterward” (Left to Tell, pg. 184-185)

grief, despair, etc. Regardless of what our particular situation is, it is a place where we hear clearly and frequently the voice of the “enemy of our human nature” taunting us and threatening us. In the “bathroom” of our difficult and painful situation, we usually pray to be set free. Like Saint Paul, we might beg God to take our pain from us, but He is much more interested in being glorified through our situation. Therefore, like Paul and like Immaculée, we are invited to encounter God in the midst of our suffering. Once we invite God into our “bathroom,” He begins transforming it into a garden where we converse with Him.

Our God is a great God. He demonstrates His amazing power and love by transforming the most unlikely of situations into avenues of grace and salvation for us.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ What is the “thorn” or “bathroom” in your life—that place of pain, struggle, confinement, and/or slavery that you want to escape from? Immaculée wrote, “Being in that bathroom had become a blessing for which I’d be forever thankful” (Left to Tell, pg. 107). What do her words stir up in your heart as you think about the “bathroom” situation in your own life?
- ✚ Read Romans 5:3-5 and relate it to your own difficult situation. Tell God what you think about this Scripture verse, *especially* as it relates to your situation.