

Sermon: September 30, 2018

“Religion and POPS”

One of the things I think about most ... being a minister ... is wondering every week ----- what’s inside your heart and soul, as you walk in here for worship? What have you been through? ... what are you thinking about? What happens if what I say on Sunday has NOTHING TO DO with what’s going on in your life?

Most of you know of my admiration for and passion for the writings of Mattie Stepanek. Hard to believe how fast time goes ----- Mattie died back in 2004, at the age of 13. Somehow ... in his humanity and innocence ... he captures the beauty of the human spirit and God’s spirit. He is able to cut through the “gunk” ... and get to the heart of what it means to be a child of God. Religion has way too much baggage ... too much “gunk” gets in the way of true spirituality.

Mattie wrote his signature poem “Heartsong” when he was about 5 ... and the one I absolutely love the most – “About the Author” – when he was 10 or 11. In “Heartsong” he says ----- “I have a song , deep in my heart, and only I can hear it. Everyone in the whole wide world has a special HEARTSONG. And if you believe you can be happy ... then you, too, will hear your song.”

When he writes a poem about himself ... he really touches our hearts.

“Whoever I am, and whatever happens ... I will always love my body and mind ... even if it has different abilities than other peoples’ bodies and minds. I will always be happy, because

I WILL ALWAYS BE ME.” (“Journey Through Heartsongs” ... by Mattie J.T. Stepanek ...

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Mattie was confined to a wheelchair ... would never do many of the things we too often take for granted. He had dreams of growing up and being a dad. But most important: he was a peace-maker ... he was a prophet of goodness ... and he knew his journey would take him to heaven.

“I will always be happy, because I will always be me.”

I read Mattie’s poem this morning. I walk “out-back” with my wonder-dog Harley. We just has 20 new bricks put into our dedication walk. There’s a new tree out there for “Mr. Fix-it.” All the names ... all the journeys ... Mattie’s words: “I will always be happy, because I will always be me.”

*My thoughts turn to Frankie 10++ years living with cancer and surgeries and procedures ...

*Linda Ruisz ... how the weariness of her journey somehow doesn’t get in the way of her faith ...

*Vern Bock ... and all the “set-backs” along the way ...

*Yesterday at Holy Sepulchre cemetery ----- hey, they let Lutherans in now!@!!

Going to where Peggy’s husband Mike is buried ... then coming back here to Jude’s Garden ... wondering if the two of them are talking about me and Peggy!@!???

Have you ever been to Pops in Palos Heights?? ---- brats? beef?

Well ---- I did the funeral for the owner’s mom this week. Makes me realize that Pops is more than a fast-food place or a hot-dog stand!! It’s an “oasis” ... it’s ‘family ... it’s a way of life.

Her granddaughter shares the eulogy ... wow: it’s like her grandma “came back to life”!!

I introduced myself to the granddaughter before the service.

What kind of work do you do? ---- I ask.

She looks at me: I WORK AT POPS!! It’s our family ... it’s our life!!

I ask her ---- did your grandma practice any particular religion??

She looks at me again: HER RELIGION WAS WORKING AT POPS!!

(With each question ... I’m feeling a bit more “stupid.”)

Her granddaughter looks at me one more time: Why do you ask???

I smile ----- well, I figured she didn't go to church ... and that's why you are "stuck" with me.
And now? ----- I know what I'll be talking about on Sunday!@!!
She laughs. I laugh. And her tribute to her grandma??? ----- she knocks it "out of the park."

I'm not sure what this has to do with the price of coffee beans in Brazil ... but -----there is a big game at Wrigley Field today. It's amazing to me ----- the season has 162 games and now the whole season hangs in the balance with just one game to play. I'm sure someone is wondering ----- that game we lost a month ago, that we should have won. My throwing error the other day ... what if I hadn't done that??
How about the one sales call you messed up??
The one funeral where you pronounced her name wrong ... and the family never came back to church.
That one class ... when you said the wrong thing ... and it comes back to bite you.

Of course there is the "other side," too. When you make the exactly right play ... when you say something extra-ordinary, turning another person's life around
It's like my friend, who asks me ... "Rev ... how many hundreds of weddings have you done???"
"Well ---- hundreds ... that's for sure."
"And you know????? ... a wedding is one of the most important moments in a family's life ----- YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO SCREW-UP even one!@!! (hey, thanks for the vote of confidence!!)
Well ... I've probably come close ... but you are right: every moment, every ceremony , every word we say or don't say ----- it makes a difference.

Every day. Every moment. It's precious.
Every Polish sausage coming out the window at Pops. Every car the mechanic works on. Every patient you bathe at the nursing home. Every sales call. Each and every teaching moment. Every pipe the plumber fixes.
Each act of kindness you show to one of our buddies at St. Coletta's.
Yes ----- your "heartsong" is always on display. It's where God lives. It's where the spirit comes alive.

I, like many of you ----- I watch TV. I read the newspaper. I, like most of you ----- I deeply care about our country. I love our country ... love the flag. When I go out back ... and see the flags waving in the air and look at all the names: my heartsong "wells-up" inside. I'm proud. I'm grateful.
It makes me want to reach-out more.
To give more.

It all causes me to wonder and question sometimes.
I'm reminded: EVERY DAY IS A GIFT ... even though "the gift" may be wrapped in packages
I don't like or even recognize.

So ... in the meantime ...
I will go to Pops more. I'll go to the nursing home more.
I'll read Mattie's poems more ... thank my plumber more ... "turn the other cheek" more.
I can treat every moment like it's the last game of the world series.

Like Mattie says: I will always be happy ... because I will ALWAYS BE ME!!