

Sermon preached by The Rev. Canon T. Mark Dunnam

All Saints Episcopal Church

Mobile, AL

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I'm on a kick, and I'd like your help. In the name of God, Amen.

For some years now, I have been doing an informal, but serious survey. I am on a search for wisdom. I believe every person has a piece of it and knows it, but no one person has it all. From what I can tell so far, wisdom is found in one's core values – those things you know in your bones to be real and true – those things on which you base your life. I am curious where you got these core values which motivate your life and are used as a basis and springboard for life decisions and behavior. Did your values and wisdom come from parents or elders, teachers, family, friends, books or maybe from personal experience in the School of the Hard Knocks?

Whatever and wherever this knowledge comes from, I believe they form one's conscience and one's conscience creates character, or state of being. The scriptures are full of good examples to follow and also bad examples.

Today in the gospel of Luke we encounter one of the latter. He is a thief, a liar, a manipulator, and deceiver. We do not think that people are born that way, but make choices that form a weak conscience and weak character. It becomes a state of being, not just behavioral acts. The Italian language has a word for such people – “furbo”- Furbo. The dictionary describes it as someone who is sly or cunning. It is that; but more: it describes someone who is ingenuine to the core, one who lives life “making the deal” – who considers everything, even personal and intimate relationships, always as “what's in it for me”. A furbo person is one who is self-referential at every turn, always using expedience for self-interest.

A perfect example of a furbo is the guy I met at a lunch counter in Enterprise Alabama some years ago. We got to talking and when I told him I worked for the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast, he perked up and said proudly: “I am an Episcopalian. I grew up in the Episcopal Church and was an acolyte as a youngster.” When I mentioned that I had never seen him at the local parish – Church of the Epiphany – he jumped in. “I am Episcopalian and I love the Episcopal Church but I am a member of First Baptist Church and am a Deacon. It's better for business.” I repeated to him, “It's better for business?” He said “yes” and smiled broadly. He didn't get the incongruity. It makes me wonder about such a person's core values, their conscience and character. What made him choose to follow that path?

Now, after almost fifty years of the priesthood and newly retired, I ask myself such questions and reflect on what made me the person I am. Perhaps, more often than not, it is a result of various crises – when I had to choose which path I would take, borne out of the pangs of conscience.

One of my earliest remembrances of such a crisis moment was in the seventh grade when I was a student at Barton Academy. Barton did not have its own gymnasium; so we had our sock hops at the Springhill Avenue Recreation Center. I loved to dance and knew how to do all the ballroom dances because I had attended cotillion the year before. I danced and danced and danced – but I couldn't help

but notice Patty Borden – everybody knew Patty, especially those of us who went to Woodcock Elementary school, who go back to the first grade with her.

Patty came to every sock hop, but no one ever asked her to dance. She just stood there next to the wall and watched. She was the original wall-flower and back in the day, a girl couldn't dance unless a boy asked. I think what made Patty unpopular was that she wore "Coca-Cola" glasses, which made her eyes look BIG. She looked like the cartoon character Mr. MaGoo. People just kept their distance from Patty – including myself. I never asked Patty to dance for fear of what everybody would think, but I began to feel sorry for her. Sock hop after sock hop she just stood there, all dressed up and ready to go, but no one ever asked her to dance.

It began to disturb my soul. So I shared my dilemma with my mother. Poor Patty, but what would people think if they saw me dancing with geeky, nerdy Patty Borden! My mother calmly said to me: "Mark, just remember, Patty has feelings just like you. Everybody has feelings." And then she twisted the knife of conscience and said: "How would you feel if you were Patty?"

I knew what I had to do. And yes, Patty accepted my invitation to dance, "Coca-Cola" eyes and all. Turned out, she was a pretty good dancer. Later when all my friends asked me why I danced with Patty, I shared with them my new found wisdom – "Patty has feeling too. How would you feel if you were Patty?" Pretty soon, everybody was dancing, even Patty was included. What fun. What Joy.

I remember another time that stands out. Many years had passed. I was a seminarian in New York City. General Seminary thought of itself as the "Green Beret" seminary. Nothing but excellence was tolerated. Our unofficial student motto was "when the goin' gets tough, the tough get goin'!" One of its rigorous exercises was required daily chapel. Roll was taken, daily Morning Prayer, noonday Eucharist, and chanted Evensong. No absence was tolerated, unless ill. One cold February evening, I was just a block away - I could hear the carillon playing which meant I had 10 minutes or less to make it. When there before me was a man spread across the sidewalk. In order to get to evensong on time I had to literally step over him and leave him there. It was a moment of decision. A crisis moment. There were no cell phones back then, no text messaging, so I went back to the corner store and called the police and ambulance and waited until they arrived. I missed chapel all together. I was AWOL. I was in trouble.

Next morning, when I went to check my mail box for mail, I found a note from my faculty advisor requesting my presence in his office later that afternoon. I knew I was in trouble and was quaking in my boots – but not too much because this was the same professor who, when I confessed to him that I had doubts and misgivings about certain aspects of the Christian faith, was understanding. In fact, he encouraged me to doubt. "That way", he said, "your faith becomes your own and not just something you inherit from others. When I told him what had happened to make me miss Evensong, he understood and reminded me that religion without compassion is not true religion. Religion without compassion is a lie.

Again, many years pass and I am now Rector of St. James Church, Florence, Italy. My favorite day of the week became Thursday, because every Thursday I volunteered to serve lunch at Caritas - similar to Catholic Social Services. At my Caritas Center we served free lunch to over 300 people - 100 people at three seatings. The work was grueling and had to be served according to Italian meticulous standards and protocol - primo, secondo and dolce - all by hand and individually served to pensioners, poor and

homeless people and African immigrants. Every Thursday I would come home exhausted but exhilarated.

One Thursday as I was leaving late and signing out at the Directoressa's desk, she thanked me for volunteering and for helping to serve lunch. I said something to her that shocked both her and myself. I don't know which of us was more taken aback. Where the words came from and why I said them I have no idea - even to this day. In response to her thanking me for serving I said, "Oh, no, no, no, e la mia salveza!" I had said it and I couldn't put the words back in my mouth as much as I wished to do so. I had just said to her, "Oh, don't thank me, it is my salvation!"

And in an unexpected instant, years of living on the Path fell into place and I understood:

If you want to be saved, go out and save somebody. Get over yourself and your hangups. Stop wasting time.

If you want to be loved, then love - love, love, love.

If you want to be free, serve and give of yourself generously.

If you want to be unburdened, then relieve burdens.

Go ask Patty to dance. There are Pattys everywhere! There is even a Patty living inside each of us. Patty has feelings, too - just like you. How would you feel if you were Patty? If you dance with Patty you will be saved. You will be on the right path.

Religion without compassion is a shuck. Religion without compassion is not true or real. It's just going around in circles.

The Way of the Master is not to be furbo, but rather the Way of the Master is the Way of the Universe - ever expanding into a dazzling, shimmering Pathway home together - God's inclusive adventure gathering God's own.

This Pathway is la mia salveza - and it is la tua salveza, too.

I know this in my bones. I'm on a kick - I'm doing a survey and I'd like your help. What do you know in your bones? What piece of Wisdom has been bestowed on you?

Have your people talk to my people!