

Is getting dirty is good for you ???

STAINS

“Please be seated.”

An impish smile crosses Martin William’s face as he holds up a sheath of papers and looks out over the congregation.

“Here in my hand, I hold the words of the sermon I worked on all week. Given the recent events in the city, I wanted to write a fiery sermon about the way the man in the street and in the pew is being treated today by arrogant and completely out of touch politicians who allegedly serve us. How their empty words and actions stand in contradiction to our Christian call to serve the poorest of society. I worked on this for hours and hours and I now offer you the fruit of my efforts.”

Then, with a flourish, Reverend Williams slides a waste basket out from under the lectern, and ceremoniously dumps the papers into the trashcan.

A collective gasp coupled with a sprinkling of good-natured applause and an undercurrent of giggles and chuckles is heard.

Smiling, he inclines his head.

“You’re welcome ...”

Hi, Tony here. It’s a beautiful summer Sunday morning here at Mt. Nebo Baptist Assembly. The pastor, Reverend Martin Williams is leading the Sunday morning service and it’s time for his sermon.

The minister is noted for his thoughtful reflections on the common and more mundane events of life. And sometimes, his dissatisfaction with current events, especially how they relate to everyday life and the people in the pews, is a favorite topic. It seems last week, several members of the state and national legislature were honored for their efforts in aiding the citizenry,

especially those in this district. Of course, all that was accomplished was a bunch of self-righteous posturing politician are famous for. All talk and no action. Reverend Williams attended along with Mike Daniels, Rabbi Green, Father Bob, and Pastor Swanson and all walked away critical about the lack of action. To a man they were dismayed, and from the comments I heard, the hypocrisy of these “civic leaders” was topic number one for the weekend.

Seems someone changed his mind, though ...

Let's listen in, shall we ...?

“So, what do I talk about,” Martin asks, lightly shrugging his shoulders.

The sanctuary is quiet as the Minister pauses a moment before continuing.

“Well, yesterday, I took a walk and passed by St. Katherine’s grade school. Next door to the school lives a gentleman named Mr. Orville Krankus and as I passed by, the Colonel, as the school kids call him, was working in his garden. Now Orville’s garden is a magnificent creation ... a world of roses, azaleas, zinnias, snap dragons - my favorite as a little boy I might add - along with hyacinths, tulips and a whole bunch of others that frankly, I’d have to ask Mr. K to come up here and name. If you drive home that way, you’ll experience a magnificent kaleidoscope of color and fragrance.”

Pausing, Reverend Williams steps down from the pulpit, proceeding to the main aisle to be closer to the people.

“Anyway, as I was watching, Mr. K got up from doing some chores and I was struck by something. His knees. Orville was wearing an old pair of tan slacks and the knees were stained; wet and brown. Looking at the beauty of Mr. K’s garden and the stains on his pants, reminded me of something I had once heard or read somewhere. ‘To the gardener, a brown knee is more important than a green thumb.’ Probably more important to the ultimate author of that garden, too. Seeing those stained trousers, I realized the magnificence of that garden; the roses and the array of flowers, is a gift from God; brought to their full beauty by a person on his or her knees who cares and nurtures them.

“The Scripture reading today is the story of the workers in the vineyard. Some were hired early in the morning, others throughout the day. And when they came to be paid, the last received as much as the first. Those hired early in the morning began to grumble. The vineyard owner replied to their anger, saying it was his right to be as generous as he wanted.”

A rustle is heard in the congregation. Skepticism pains the faces of a number of parishioners.

Martin chuckles softly to himself. “Okay, I know some of you have voiced the opinion this story doesn’t seem fair. And yes, those who worked all day in the hot sun, probably did thirst; maybe experiencing pain from kneeling, or a backache. And yes, to work all day and receive the same wage as someone working only an hour can rightfully be considered unfair. I understand that sentiment. But I’d like to take the thought a bit further.”

He pauses a moment as people shuffle in their seats.

“Ask yourself, does the incident omit something that might have occurred? From Jesus’ words one might conclude all the workers hired first were angry. I wonder, were there some who weren’t? I’d like to think so. Some who realized the most important thing was the dignity of their work and that they were compensated fairly. They experienced the satisfaction of understanding it was their effort and talent that would bring forth a bounty to be enjoyed by all. A realization not possible to those who came last.

“In my friend Bob’s church, St. Katherine’s, there is a stained-glass window; the one of the prodigal son. It shows the Father greeting his errant son, while the older brother looks on, an angry look on his face.

“The statement about the knees of the gardener in a way brings to mind for me, what the Father says to the older son. Remember, ‘You are always with me ... everything I have is yours ...’ The father is saying something that, due to the son’s faithfulness, until then, needed not be spoken.

“The workers hired in the morning, and the older son have something in common. That while God is generous to those who appear only at the end, maybe the greatest joy is reserved for he or she who works the whole day, who is faithful always. For them, justice will be done and the reward to come will be enormous. Why, because it will come from within ... an understanding impossible to those who arrive late and slip in the back door.”

Martin walks slowly up the aisle toward the pulpit, letting his thoughts sink in.

“Work is the expression of man’s understanding and acceptance of the fact that he or she is made in the image and likeness of God,” he continues. “Those who see their work as something sacred, as something in concert with being productive as God is productive do not grumble. They are satisfied because the work itself is where great dignity lies. An understanding money alone cannot buy.

“Jesus was a working man Himself. He, more than anyone, knows the satisfaction of a job well done. And He knows the reward to come for those who choose to live in light, in understanding, and in faith.”

Ascending the steps to the pulpit, Martin stops, turning to the congregation. “Oh, and if you get a chance, walk or drive by St. Kate’s and take a good look at the garden next door ...

... it’s magnificent.”

How often do we get our knees dirty in God’s garden ... this world in which we live? How often do we get the job done? Is our Creator more impressed by our self-important words, or our simple deeds? “Not great things done humbly, but rather humble things done greatly” in the words of a noted Saint. Do we fall into the trap of believing our intelligence, our words, are somehow superior to those who simply do what needs to be done? What’s more impressive to the Master; a self-righteous and self-congratulatory letter to an editor registering our profound thoughts or indignation, or a simple cup of water given to a thirsty child ... a child of His?

There’s a call for a new evangelization in the Church in Rome. Given the creeping relativism and utter disdain for concrete principles of right and wrong in many circles, really, that call resounds throughout the entire Judeo/Christian world. If that evangelization is to be effective, who will have more to do with its success? The man or woman on his or her knees, working in the vineyard; living life justly, with love, fidelity, and simple joy? Or all the church officials and religious and secular

“professionals” who, by all their talk, do little more than, in effect, put a shiny new blanket on the same old show pony and expect it to win the Kentucky Derby?

One last question. When the Master Gardener comes to harvest His garden, will those who leave the actual work to others ... be the flowers ...

... or the weeds?

... Thinkaboutit ... I’m Tony Baggz.

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