

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

Austin, Texas

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Proper 24 (Year B), Mark 10:31-45

All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee. Amen.

Jesus says to his disciples, “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first...whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:31,44).

Missy and I have not had a television in our bedroom for nearly ten years. When we are sick and quarantined, confined to our room, or when it’s Saturday morning and our children come crawling into bed with us, we occasionally miss being able to flip channels from under the sheets. For the most part, though, it’s a good thing that we were not tempted to stay up later than we should, re-watching re-runs of *King of the Hill* and *Seinfeld*, or finding ourselves drawn into some unexpected drama about Lord only knows what.

More recently, however, I’ve started staying up too late anyway, lingering in the den and falling asleep sitting in a chair and watching the news, the way I watched my father do and thought I never would. And, every now and then, Missy and I still find ourselves entranced in a program we can’t turn off. It wasn’t too long ago that we stayed up late together to watch the documentary, *My Flesh and Blood*.

The film presents the real-life story of the Toms, a family of thirteen children, and their mother, Susan Tom. The eleven youngest children are adopted, and ten of the eleven have significant disabilities. Two of the teenage girls, Hannah and Xenia, were born without legs. Another, Chloe, cannot bend her knees or her elbows. A fifteen-year-old boy, Joe, suffers from Cystic Fibrosis. Faith, now a second-grader, suffered third-degree burns over her head and torso as a three-month-old. Margaret, who has recently enrolled at the local community college, suffers from epilepsy and overcame brain surgery as an infant.

We watched the Toms host a Halloween party in their backyard during which Joe plays a mad magician who saws in half one of the legless girls. On her hands, she jumps from the box and runs screaming away, all to the delight of the family. We watched the children swim, visit a trapeze artists’ gymnasium, and make frequent trips to the hospital. We watched them at school and heard, with them, the predictable and painful adolescent commentary offered by their classmates. And we watched them eat together, gathering around a series of cardtables set one beside the other to form one long supper table without a single matching chair. The image was beautiful and crazy and overwhelming, this sprawling family in their own upper room, human fragility worn on their sleeves and on their faces and in their very skin.

Our lives as Stewards are not about improving our position in the Kingdom of Heaven, but about becoming “slave[s] of all” (Mark 10:45). Inspired by their Teacher’s final Passion prediction when he attempts to communicate as much, James and John approach Jesus, asking “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mark 10:37). Jesus must have been thrilled at the depth of their understanding. Even so, he remains calm and even kind: “You do not know what you are asking,” he tells them. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38) Naively they

affirm that they can, indeed, drink from that difficult cup, and Jesus affirms that, indeed, they will. Position in heaven, however, is not even his to give, for the ministry which they share is not for their own glory, but for God's, and for God's alone.

Ms. Susan Tom, the mother of this lot in *My Flesh and Blood*, does not come across as perfect. She is unhealthily overweight. She neither keeps nor even seeks paid employment. After the last child is put to bed, the cameras catch her taking a deep breath of relief before she sits at her computer to cruise internet chat rooms. She is divorced and the younger of her two birth children, now grown, does not hide his disappointment in his mother's diverted attention and the enormous responsibilities her decisions required him to bear as a young man.

I caught myself wondering if this woman were not avoiding some dark piece of herself by bringing all these children into her home. I wondered if she might not be playing the government system. And I wondered if some child could not help but be neglected because of the sheer number of bodies in the house at once. Full of my own self-righteousness, "At whose right hand are you seeking to sit," I wanted to ask of her. And then I watched Susan Tom pick up her nineteen-year-old adopted son, Anthony, from his wheelchair.

Anthony suffers from a form of Epidermolysis Bullosa (EB), a disease affecting the enzymes that bind the skin to the soft tissue beneath. His body does not produce enough of the material, and, as a result, his skin falls off in sheets, pieces big and small. The rare disease is chronic, incurable, and, inevitably, fatal from the infections it invites. Four times every week Susan Tom will lift this small man from his wheelchair and set him in a special bathtub. There she will carefully undress him, unwrap the bandages from his impossibly many open wounds, and gently wash him with a light solution of bleach and water. Anthony will cry quietly as his mother bathes him. Including the time to re-bandage him, the process will take over three hours. When the filmmakers ask how she can do this – all of this – week-in, week-out, she says plainly, as though her reason would surely be obvious to anyone as it was to her, "How can I not? [They are] my flesh and [my] blood."

In their commentary on the Gospel of Mark, David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie suggest, "While faith and authority are the heart of Jesus' relation with God, [*servicing*] defines his way of relating to other people. Jesus teaches the disciples to be everyone's servant – that is, not to use their power like one who is in a position to lord over others and be served by them, but to...serve without regard for status or reward, [*using*] their power on behalf of others with less power than themselves – not because it is a personal sacrifice [*for their own benefit*] but because it empowers others" (107). *Not because it is a personal sacrifice [for their own benefit] but because their servanthood empowers [and aids] others less powerful than themselves.*

All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee. Recognizing our blessings as a gift from God, we are called to give of what we have, not for priority or for position but for the sake of God's Kingdom and nothing else. Can we be honest with ourselves and with our God, asking: how can we, who have so much, give so little and believe ourselves faithful, when so many who have nothing and suffer so much, give everything they have? *How can we, who have so much, give so little and believe ourselves faithful, when so many who have nothing and suffer so much, give everything they have?*

I often hear folks lament the absence of “clean movies,” “clean television,” “good, clean music,” and I understand what is being said. There are those of us who could do without the violence and the profanity and the sexually explicit material of some media programming. And that is fine. What is not fine is that too much of the “clean” programming washes away the truth of our lives along with the four-letter words and shower scenes, leaving behind only “perfect” people: the dutiful husband, the good wife, the loving, healthy children. These perfect people drive new cars and live in gardened homes in quiet neighborhoods, which may resemble too much the surface of our own lives. After a while, watching and listening to only these good, clean people allows their stories to become for us the image of normalcy and the edgeless voice of a moral Christ. We forget the dirty, complicated, imperfect, and unwieldy truth of our own lives, until, ultimately, we fail to hear and see the deep need of our world and our community, so much so that, when a person like Susan Tom hears a different cry of Christ, our first inclinations are to hesitation and suspicion.

We believe and declare ourselves faithful *when we are not*, looking to be raised high rather than to stoop low; seeking to be master, rather than to be servant; looking toward the Son of Man ascended, rather than the One condemned and mocked and flogged and spit upon and killed.

Jesus says to his disciples, “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first,” a paradox confusing the customary order of our world and our lives (Mark 10:31). As my friend and colleague Mary Vano observes, “there is one geometrical arrangement in which [Jesus’ claim] makes perfect sense: a circle.” For when we stand in a circle we cannot help but see that we are made whole by the people who surround us. When we stand in a circle each one is important, but no one is most important. When we stand in a circle we can behold one another – the good in us, the bad in us; the joy in us, the sorrow in us; the health in us, the sickness in us; and everything in-between – recognizing the necessity we have for one another. In a circle we can joyfully give of our gifts and see how others benefit from our offering, and, moreover, we can also more fully receive the gifts are offered to us. When we stand in a circle, one kept open to the world and to our God, we can see that Holy One in us and in the midst of us, a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven.

The love of Susan Tom I saw in the film was not clean: she made mistakes, could not negotiate every difficulty that her family faced; she doubted, she cried, she got angry. And her imperfect love was unrelenting, a devotion I can scarcely imagine.

As we continue on this Stewardship journey, I pray that we would not become blind and deaf to the truth of the world in which we live; that we would seek to serve, rather than to be served; that we would stand in the open circle of this Body, recognizing that these with whom we gather and all those we remember – those known to us and those known to God alone – that all of these are our brothers and our sisters, nothing less than our flesh and our blood.

All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee. May we live the prayers we pray.