

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

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Text: Deuteronomy 30:19, 20

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"Life Beyond Laundry Lists"

Life often requires of us a laundry list of things we have to do. Perhaps you need to clean your house or go grocery shopping. Or is the laundry calling you? Or paying those bills? Or getting ready for work tomorrow? Or just to get some rest? Most of the time life is about *doing* things. And life will always be like that. But there must be more to it than that. There is.

There is more. We are gathered this morning because there is more to life. Let me try to show you.

I saw the latest movie version of Hairspray last week. That movie brought back so much of the ethos of my youth –the suits with very thin belts and ties and the girls with their bouffant hairstyles. Even its tough political story, the racial integration of a TV dance show in Baltimore, fell into the upbeat swell of this movie –a swell that even overcame my horrible foreboding for that first interracial couple. Yeah, Hairspray was a hoot!

But that movie also reminded me of my first day in the USA. I was 18 years old and had traveled alone for 23 days on the Dutch passenger liner, Oranje, (which later sank in the Mediterranean). We disembarked at Ft. Lauderdale in July. Florida in July. So humid. I had never experienced such hot, steamy weather in my long 18 years of life. And from the ship's heights I was stunned at the size of the automobiles far below on the dock. They looked like aircraft carriers. So began my first day in America –strange, yet beckoning!

Somehow I reached the Greyhound station. I don't remember how. When you are 18 some parts of your day are focused and some, well, are not. Anyway I boarded a Greyhound bus and remember purchasing my ticket to Texas from the driver. It was my first experience with American money: I felt I was shortchanged. I was positive I was short-changed! Well, there's lesson number one in America! There were many more to come.

As I climbed into the bus I found that there were no seats available in the front –but, oddly, there were a *lot* in the back.... Lesson number 2 coming up. It was 1962 and the Interstate Commerce Commission had only ended segregation on interstate transportation in 1960. Habits and attitudes take a long time to change and the layout of the bus passengers confirmed this.

But this 18 year old from Australia had no idea. Clueless. So as I moved down the aisle I spotted a young man, like myself, way in the back and chose to sit by him. As I put my hand luggage in the rack above, I was puzzled why he looked so apprehensive. I wanted to know about him. But he certainly didn't look like he wanted to know about me.

Being such a gregarious Aussie, I didn't care. And after introductions, I told him where I was from. And, you know what? When he heard that I was from outside of America, he really relaxed and joined in that good-natured youthful sharing. He smiled and laughed and told me all about himself. I can't remember what he said. Oh, did I tell you that he was black? Hairspray in action!

And yet in all our talking, as the bus rolled through the Deep South, he never brought up

the topic of race. I wish he had because I was clueless about what was really happening. When night fell we stopped talking and, as the bus lumbered on, I mulled over the puzzle of our initial meeting. At some point, much, much later, lesson 2 would dawn on me: No wonder he looked apprehensive! A white guy intentionally sitting next to a black guy in a bus in Florida!

But there's more. As the night wore on I learned that I would never sleep on a bus. Not so with my new friend! He was asleep, and deep in the night, he moved, and his head fell onto my shoulder.

Now this was something new! And I was unsure just what I should do. It was kind of nice and it was a testament to how comfortable he felt with me, I suppose. I didn't wake him. I just let him sleep there. And yet I felt uncomfortable for what it might suggest. But I let him stay there. It was kind of nice. Did I say that already? That was to be lesson number 6098 one day.

But lesson number three was a lot more imminent. The bus' restroom was in the back and several people passed by us. Eventually the bus hit a bump and my friend rolled his head the other way. It dropped off my radar. But it stayed on others'.

In the morning we stopped at some awfully hot and humid dumpy bus station for breakfast and as I walked out of the bus a lot of the white riders gave me my first unwelcome glares in America. The looks were truly ugly, so much so that I couldn't flash my usual upbeat Aussie smile. This time I began to be clued in on what was going on. The coin had dropped at last. The arduous learning process of being in America had finally begun.

That was my first day in America and I think I touched on almost all the taboos I was **ever** going break in my life on that long, hot and steamy first day. I thank Hairspray for reminding me. But that is not why we are here today. Or is it? Perhaps it is.

For on that first day in America I had a foretaste of why I came to America –why almost everyone wants to come to America and what many Americans want America to become. Deep inside me were conflicts and yearnings for freedom and liberation not yet understood, that opened up into the Promised Land, for choosing life beyond just its laundry lists and the local prejudices.

On that day and today we have a vision as Moses put it:
I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving, obeying and holding fast to God; for that means life to you, so that you may live in the land that the Most High swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

It is this vision of the Promised Land of justice that glued me to the black and white screen when Martin Luther King preached it at the Lincoln Memorial; this vision of the Promised Land that sent chills down my spine when the coast of America first came into view. It is this vision of the Promised Land that placed me beside a scared young black man on that bus in the dance of freedom breaking in between us. It is this same vision of his head on my shoulder that we want the Lutheran church to rediscover.

It is our living out this vision of the Promised Land that Jesus calls the way of the cross and invites us to follow him. This is why we are here. This is Life with a capital “L.” Are you not here this day because you too yearn for liberation and freedom into a world where all nations and all persons shall live together in peace and in a true commonwealth?

So, let us choose Life! God has given us power to choose it! Let us choose Life and let us daily live in it by the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit! Amen

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